

THE STORY OF
COTTON CONNIXLOO
FORGOTTEN
CAMILLE MAYRAN







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THE STORY OF GOTTON CONNIXLOO

FOLLOWED BY

FORGOTTEN

BY

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**THE STORY OF
GOTTON CONNIXLOO**

THE STORY OF GOTTON CONNIXLOO

CHAPTER I

THE village of Metsys, the gray roofs of which cluster on the Flemish plain not far from Malines, has preserved intact to this day a beautiful church in the flamboyant style. Its irregular façade resembles an old face covered with wrinkles whose kindly and mysterious smile conceals a world of secrets. 'About the curves of its porch are coiled garlands of flowers and fruits. The tympanum, in which appears the Virgin Mary with angels paying homage, quivers with a beating of wings. A pointed gable surmounts the porch and repeats the sharp angle of the roof. From the cross-aisle of the transepts rises a belfry so delicate, of such exquisite lace-work, that one might expect it to tremble in the wind or with the vibration of the sprightly chimes that issue from it on Sunday mornings. Around the apse sleep the tombs.

The traveler who arrives at Metsys in the even-

ing of a rainy day walks a long time across the rich, monotonous countryside, passes villages whose dung-heaps are almost as big as cottages, skirts canals where the black vessels on the glistening water seem to be drifting in a mournful dream—a dreary journey! When he sees the ethereal belfry thrown up against the narrow, amber-colored belt of the horizon, he has a sudden joyful sense of relief. The shaft of stone draws up toward heaven the sighs that lose themselves sorrowfully in the immensity of the plain. Revived as if by a sign of welcome and hope, the traveler hastens on; and if at dusk he stops in the square planted with lime-trees, where a little fountain chatters in the midst of the humble houses, ranged in a circle, with a few ducks splashing in front of them, if he surveys the old church, calm, arrayed in its jewels, he will perhaps tremble with delight as if he had stumbled upon a grotto of the fairies.

For nearly twenty years—they assure me that the German occupation has not changed things in any way—the inhabitants of this little square have seen entering their church, every day at noon and again in the dusk of the evening, a tall, thin personage, bent over nowadays, and with a beard, long, very black, which has begun to whiten; it is the bell-ringer and chorister, Connixloo. When he has sounded the Angelus, he crosses the square with his long and mechanically rapid steps, regains his little house, which is situated in front of the church, and seats himself

at the cobbler's bench whither the people of Metsys carry him their shoes to be repaired. He is a solitary man; the goodwives of the village do not linger before his bench. The solemnity of the Sunday high masses, at which, for many years, he has sung, alone and upright in the first choir stall, has endowed him with a lasting prestige. His spare, melancholy form, the severe expression of his aquiline nose and his closely-pressed mouth, are intimidating. They respect his silent ways. They know that he has had great misfortunes, but no one except the curé ever dares to speak to him about them. His great piety envelops him in mystery and protects him from indiscretions. People say that he is a man who has communications with another world. The regular frame of his life is a niche in which he appears like a saint, rigid, withdrawn, his eyes turned heavenward. Nevertheless, if one examines his face closely, one observes a blinking of the eyes that indicates a nervous nature; if one seeks his glance, one feels that something is astir at the bottom of those brown eye-balls, something that is secreting itself. A keen observer understands quickly enough that in his hermit's niche the chorister of Metsys shelters an apprehensive, uncertain and tormented soul.

This man was once married. At Metsys his contemporaries still recall the beautiful wedding-feast given—a full twenty-five years ago—at a farm in the neighborhood whence, in procession, by the light of lanterns, through a snowy winter night, they led

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Jeanne Maers to the home of Connixloo. There had not been seen, in the memory of man, a more beautiful bride. Two years after the marriage, they laid her in the earth. She had just given birth to a little girl.

Left a widower before he was thirty, Connixloo had never wished to remarry, in spite of the counsels which people did not fail to offer him. The men said to him at the wine-shop:

"Live without a wife, Connixloo? You shouldn't think of it! Besides, it would look badly if it were known that the chorister of Metsys ran about after petticoats!"

He replied by quoting the apostle Saint Paul who, he said, wrote an epistle to advise Christians not to marry if possible, and at worst to content themselves with marrying once. This attitude so astonished them that they asked themselves if the beautiful Jeanne had not given him cause for chagrin. For, thought these men, one easily forgets a wife one has lost but not a wife who has deceived one.

The little girl, who was called Marguerite at her baptism but Gotton by custom, was sent out to nurse, until she reached the age of three years, with her mother's family. Then Connixloo wished to take her into his own home; he made for her a little bed with an eider-down quilt, he went off and bought her two dolls and, without reflecting that she had passed the age for them, a dozen embroidered bibs. The grandmother having died in the course of these three years, he had

little difficulty in recovering the child from two young aunts who were in the full bloom of motherhood.

When little Gotton was installed at Metsys, she attracted a number of female visitors to the house of the severe Connixloo. They came, now to bring her a little fresh cheese, now, if they had heard she was ill, a remedy for colds or colic, or again they would offer to take her to play at such and such a farm where there were little children. They would find her trotting about the stool where her father was sitting plying his awl or, more often, squatting before the fireplace and interrupting her contemplation of the red coals with sudden capers and little bursts of laughter. She was pretty and her solitude touched the women's hearts. The worthy visitors took up again with the widower the work of persuasion which, with the clumsy jokes of the men, had come to naught.

"You don't know how difficult it is for a man to bring up a girl and keep her in hand!" they said to him. "Chorister as you are, your Latin won't help you there, Connixloo!" There was in particular in the village a widow without children who had a little property and had convinced herself that Connixloo could not fail to marry her. For several years she had counted on this, telling herself that after all he would be acceptable for a second marriage, not merry but trustworthy as he was, and as for the rest personable enough with his thin nose and black beard. She went to his house several times a week and passed many a night preparing her dignified but eager resig-

nation to a marriage which was never offered to her. This widow and several other women, thereafter, had no good wishes for either Connixloo or his daughter. To their exhortations he replied: "Bah! the stick two or three times a year keeps them in order, especially when there's also a good example nearby." The women would return to their homes pitying the little girl.

The better to set an example and keep himself from temptation, Connixloo became more and more devout. His duties in the church procured for him, so to say, a quite special intimacy with the Eternal. When he spoke of the things of God, from the Holy Trinity all the way down to the last cruet acquired by the parish, it was with the seriousness, the proud modesty and that suggestion of a special understanding of the privileged servitor. The priest had made him the gift of a very advanced catechism of the diocese of Malines. He instructed himself in it in the evenings, on his return from sounding the Angelus, when he had finished his work and settled the little girl for the night. Sitting on his bed and bending over toward the candle, he scrutinized the difficult points of doctrine and jostled his way painfully among the learned and incomprehensible vocables. However, some light was born at various points in his study and he experienced a dry and silent joy. On Sunday, at the wine-shop, he would discuss theology with the schoolmaster, the burgomaster and a few farmers. He had very precise ideas concerning the distinction between

mortal sins and venial sins—and they were not reassuring. He also spoke very readily about indulgences and would enumerate for you with a confidential winking of his eyes and almost with the air of a gourmet the pilgrimages which he had made, the scapularies with which he was provided. Then he would terrify the easy-going company by adding with a great blow of his fist on the table: “For all that, my friends, if you have on your conscience a single little mortal sin unconfessed, all these things will slide off you like water from a duck’s back.”

Gotton was growing up and people wondered that she was so well-behaved. At seven years she began to go to school and she stayed there until her first communion. After that, she was sent for three months to stay with her aunts at the Maers farm where they taught her to look after the cows, milk them, churn the cream and make butter and various kinds of fresh cheese. She entered joyously into all these labors, in company with the little cousins of her own age. The laughter of these children stirred her, and still more the kisses that she saw them continually receive from their mothers. Filled with a strange emotion, in which a keen pleasure was mingled with distress, she laughed more loudly than the others and in turn hung on the neck of the youngest of her aunts, who was gentle and pretty and was nursing her last baby. For this young woman she conceived a sort of passion, seeking her out, following her with her eyes, and calling for her aloud at night in her

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dreams. Because of this, they considered her peculiar, and they censured once more the obstinacy of Connixloo.

When three months were over, little Gotton, fairly well instructed in the arts of dairying, tearfully left a house that was too full, too busy, and too happy for anyone to think of regretting her. It was the oldest of her aunts who brought her back to Metsys. This woman whispered into the ear of Connixloo, as she left the little girl with him: "She's a dear little thing; but she's going to give you some yarn to unravel!"

Meanwhile Connixloo put in order a little stable, long unused, that stood at the back of the house, on the side where a little kitchen-garden adjoined the fields which stretched as far as the eye could reach. He had just invested the greater part of his savings in the purchase of two beautiful cows, selected in the market of Malines. When she saw these magnificent red and black animals, steaming in the autumn morning and beating the hollows of their flanks with their enormous tails, Gotton felt comforted again. Her father told her that she must take them to pasture every day as she had seen her cousins do, milk them morning and evening and prepare, as she had also just learned to do, fresh cheese, which a dairyman from Malines would send for twice a week. Gotton was twelve years old. She felt that she was being treated like a grown-up person and this experience filled her at the same time with pride and sadness. The deep, mysterious sense of something missing

troubled all her thoughts. She recalled her pretty aunt and the laughter of her cousins, and she thought to herself: "It's all over, then; I'm not a child any more!" When she had spoiled her first batches of cheese, her father's stick removed this illusion somewhat; but in saying to herself, "I am no longer a child," she realized above everything else that she was living without anyone to kiss her. In fact, nobody did kiss her, and in her solitude she experienced hours of languor when the need of caresses made her lips tremble.

Connixloo had discouraged feminine attentions; besides, a little girl of twelve years no longer appeals to the maternal instinct in anyone but her own mother, and if no widow or girl in the village any longer thought of marrying the bell-ringer, so also there was no longer any woman who cared to look after Gotton. The child grew up neglected, dreaming by herself whole afternoons, in the pastures whither she took the cows. Later, when she recalled this period of her life, she remembered the sensation of mist that penetrated her, hour after hour, benumbing her mind and chilling her blood. Her recollections condensed themselves into images of autumn, heavy and gray.

In the desolate monotony of this life, she soon forget her pretty aunt and her cousins and the gayety of the Maers farm. She forgot, also, everything that she had learned at school. The care of the stable and the raising of a few vegetables absorbed her thoughts. Under the weight of silence, her spirit took root in the

earth, that ample and exacting mistress. One pleasure alone remained to her, one admiration, one source of reverie: this was the old church. She did not like the services, where she saw the other little girls, arrayed in dresses better cared for than her own, grouped about a mother or an older sister; but she loved to go alone to the church, when she had brought back her cows, after a long afternoon in the meadows, to warm her soul in the flame of the windows. She would watch till nightfall the scintillations grow more and more dim. It was so cold outside, and so dismal; the great horizon seemed chilling, the crouching cottages beside the muddy road had the look of poor shivering cattle. But in the little church with its strange decorations, full of fragile and confused objects, an inextinguishable fire made the windows quiver eternally. The mystery of these glassy flames fascinated the child. Her eyes feasted on the shadowy purple and the blue. These gemlike fragments, these burning essences, these living elixirs offered her the spectacle of an unwearying ecstasy. Contemplating them, she fell into an abyss of reverie. It seemed to her so beautiful, so astonishing that these tiny morsels of glass, brought together, should so continue to palpitate, to burn, through the pale wet winters and the dull, inexorable tedium that engulfed the countryside. She marveled over their incommunicable secret, that active and devouring passion which, at the first ray of dawn, revived in them. And perhaps she asked herself, in one of those moments of spiritual awaken-

ing that pass almost without leaving any memory behind, if there existed somewhere, under the surface of the earth or behind the clouds, behind even the round vault of the clear sky, a similar hearth-fire of life and ardor, a panting heart from which we draw our blood and our soul, and all love, all light, all hope. . . . But how far she felt from that divine hearth and what a thick veil of mist, earth and ignorance lay between her and it!

She returned to her home with an absent-minded step, her soul heavy with obscure, unformulated desires. She found her father seated at the bench, pale, his head bent over an old shoe. He rose to go and sound the Angelus and prepare the cruets for the morrow's mass. She lighted the lamp, which was suspended by a brass chain and pulley from the ceiling. Then began the long silent evening. At great intervals Connixloo would ask his daughter a question or give her an order relating to the work of the house. The child was rather afraid of her father, as of a power she did not understand. She obeyed him strictly, with an almost mechanical submissiveness. She did not dream of asking herself if she loved him. She suffered him in silence, like the rain, the wind, the long winter. Yet, at first, Connixloo had meant well. He had wished that his little girl might be gay and that she might confide in him. But how was he to bring it about? These women-to-be are so mysterious already! In her way, Gotton was also for Connixloo a power not to be understood. Vexed at his own

clumsiness, he had given up hope of pleasing and yielded to his natural inclination for a harsh taciturnity.

In his presence the child felt even more lost than in the somnolent immensity of the fields. Seated in a corner of the hearth, watching over the soup, she hoped that he would not speak to her and gave herself up to the slow play of her dreams. They were sorry images, for the most part, earthy and trivial, that unrolled themselves in her head. But at times, athwart the dull torpor of these memories that seemed to compose her whole spirit, there would pierce a strange aspiration which for Gotton resembled nothing that words could express, a humble longing, naïve and melancholy, to be no longer Gotton Connixloo, watcher of cows under a rainy sky—a dream without words, almost without images, powerful enough nevertheless to half awaken, amid the dull weight of misery, the very depths of her being.

* * * * *

Seven years had passed and Connixloo sometimes rubbed his eyes and murmured: "Dear God! how quickly a girl grows up!" He perceived almost suddenly that the child had become a woman and that she was very beautiful. The transformation astonished him as if it had been the work of a single morning. Gotton was nineteen years old and from the vigorous body, which had grown big under its humble garments, amid heavy labors, breathed now, like a soft, vague perfume, the mystery of womanhood.

She was as silent as ever; but in this silence, which had formerly seemed dull or shamefaced, Connixloo now suspected a vague menace. "Yes," he said, "they were right; it isn't easy to know what a girl has in her head." She was like her mother, a true Fleming, while he was of Walloon blood. He could not think without a sense of uneasiness about that flowering young woman whom he had loved all too vehemently. Yes, truly, he had wished not to be reminded that for Jeanne Maers he would once have sold his soul. The thought of it still troubled him, in spite of that sudden and pathetic end of hers in her first childbed, and he was vexed with Gotton for it.

She had that ample beauty of Flemish women, bold, florid, animated, with smiling curves; yellow hair that hung down her back like a golden cord ten times twisted and knotted, a powerful neck of a misty, pearly whiteness, cheeks of a texture as luminous as peonies newly blown in the dawn of a spring day. Bright little locks flew about on her smooth forehead. Her slender eyebrows traced a long, tapering golden curve above the little eyes, which were so clear, so fresh, so transparent that they seemed like the shimmering of a spring inexhaustibly renewed.

What did they signify, the scintillations of these little eyes? That is what Connixloo asked himself sometimes, gripped with a sudden disquietude, when the silent Gotton, her lips moist, her cheeks radiant, returned from the meadows with the cows. He watched her as she crossed the threshold of the cot-

tage, upright between the clumps of geranium which, without doubt, owed to their proximity to the dung-heap the red vigor of their corollas. Vaguely he perceived that there was something sensual and voluptuous in the lingering gait of this beautiful girl, in the balancing of her shoulders and her robust hips. It was May. He thought to himself: "She has changed since winter. Perhaps it is imprudent to let her pass her days alone in the fields." The unfolding of this flower of youth was to him nothing but a heavy care.

"I must get her married," he said to himself again. But she was headstrong, and already in the course of the year she had turned her back on several offers in the village, why, no one was able to understand.

"Nothing new?" he asked her, as she reached the doorstep.

"Nothing," she replied. There was never anything new. Why, then, that strange light at the back of her eyes, that little ingenuous flame, mischievous and merry? To-morrow he would go himself to surprise her in the fields.

Toward three o'clock, on the morrow of the day when his confused fears had resulted in this resolution, Connixloo crossed the village and followed the path between the beet-fields as far as a strip of pasturage that bordered the outskirts of a little wood. Gotton was standing there, close to her cows, upright in the thick grass, a knitted stocking in her hand. But her needles were not busy and she seemed to be following with her eyes a man who was going off

down the road. Connixloo looked at this silhouette which was the only thing stirring on the plain. It was that of a man with large shoulders, almost squat, who limped as he walked. He was going bare-headed, and one could distinguish that his hair was red. On the side of his shorter leg he carried, suspended from his hand, something that shone and seemed to be heavy. This had the look of a bundle of scythes, observing which Connixloo reflected that the first hay harvest was not far off. He stopped a moment, perplexed, troubled, then he at once felt reassured: a lame man! He accosted Gotton, who had not seen him coming.

"Good pasturage here for your cows?"

Gotton turned her head without showing any surprise, but the blood was in her cheeks.

"It's you, father? The grass is good, yes! And the day is fine, too!"

If Connixloo had felt any suspicion, he would have said nothing about it to his daughter, in order that without awakening her distrust he might watch her the better. But, already relieved, he asked her, to make positively certain:

"You haven't spoken to anyone?"

"Yes," she said.

"Indeed! And to whom?"

"You don't know him. A blacksmith from Iseghem who sometimes passes by here."

"And how do you happen to know him?"

"He has spoken to me on the road."

There was a moment of silence. Gotton knitted. In a sharp voice Connixloo returned:

"And is it a long time since you struck up this fine acquaintance?"

"When I was harvesting at Iseghem last summer, he repaired the ring of my scythe."

Connixloo recollected the bundle of glittering blades which he had observed in the distance. He asked:

"Was he the man who was going along the road just as I came?"

"Perhaps."

"He's lame?"

"That may well be," she said, with a touch of irritation.

"And why have you never spoken to your father about this acquaintance?"

Gotton turned her little shining eyes upon her father and did not reply.

Connixloo felt himself invaded by a strange emotion in which fear prevailed over anger. If Gotton had lowered her head, if she had been confused, if she had had an air of deceitfulness, she would have made him furious; but this direct frankness and this burning glance made him shiver. He had a sudden sensation of the abyss into which an avowal could throw him. "I'll watch her," he said to himself. "She looks as if she had it on the tip of her tongue to say something surprising." And he addressed her more calmly:

"Listen, Gotton, you know that I don't wish this sort of thing. You can marry any day you please. There's no lack of fine fellows at Metsys whom you've turned up your nose at. If you wish to remain a lass you are free to do so. If you don't wish to remain a lass, take a husband. But not along the roads, you understand. I have not brought you up in honor and religion for you to turn your back on suitable offers and then run about having love affairs in the fields."

Gotton did not protest her innocence and made no promise: she was silent. Connixloo, without knowing why, felt discountenanced before this silence which might be taken for respect. He took his pipe from his pocket, and when he had filled it, with slightly trembling fingers, he said:

"That's enough grass for the cows to-day; come home with me."

With the goad Gotton pricked the two red cows, which were bent over ruminating, and urged them on before her. It was a pity to go home so soon. The sky was a mild clear blue and along this edge of the wood one could hear the ringdoves cooing. They walked side by side, gloomily, all the way to the village. Connixloo smoked his pipe, turning over his troubled thoughts, and Gotton, filled with bitter agitation, raised her arm from time to time and let it droop wearily over the spine of one of her cows. When she had put her animals in the stable to wait for milking-time, she returned to the low room where

an old ham, left from winter, hung from the black rafters of the ceiling, among the strings of onions. Her father was awaiting her, standing close to the window, nervously biting his thumb. But now that she was there, he did not know what to say to her. His table, with the instruments all ready and several pairs of boots promised for the end of the week, invited him to work. He made an attempt to apply himself. Gotton meanwhile stirred the fire and blew with the bellows on the cinders. She wanted to say something friendly; she felt pity for her father because he was sad, and also because he was hard. Lifting her hand toward the leather-colored ham, she said:

"Would you like me to set it soaking, father, so that you can invite his reverence to eat it with us on Sunday?"

"That's a good idea," said Connixloo, "and I'll go and see him right away."

Indeed he did not hesitate a moment, but left the house at once. To the priest he unburdened himself of half of his anxieties.

"Don't worry yourself too much, my good Connixloo," the priest said to him. "You have always set her a good example, and that won't be lost. Only, you must remember, she's young; don't make her life too dull. Young blood may easily turn to vice within when it is not allowed to boil up a little, honestly, outside. Gotton is a good child, but she has always had notions in her head. Watch over her and

amuse her sometimes. And then send her to me soon so that I may talk with her. Good-bye, Connixloo, and thanks for Sunday. It's agreed!"

The next day Connixloo left the house on Gotton's heels and by a circuitous path reached the little wood on the border of which he had found her the afternoon before. He saw that she was again in the field and, concealing himself behind a thorn-bush, he resolved to watch her till the hour of her return.

"I shall know better what's going on," he thought; "perhaps it's not for nothing that she has come back to the same spot." He spread himself out flat on his stomach, his elbows buried in the moss, over which crept little wreaths of flowering periwinkle. The wood was full of a sweet odor of fresh verdure; the bees murmured in a blossoming cherry-tree and on the higher branches of the oaks the ringdoves, whose confused, harmonious voices seemed as if emerging from a serene half-slumber, interchanged their long, faint breathings of delight. Now and then, from the glowing web of their lower notes there would spring forth a sharper cry, more joyous, more imperious, flung from the full throat of a little bird, a cry that lifted itself amid these murmurs like the voice of a little child triumphantly born from the languors and raptures of love.

Connixloo had entered this festival of spring as a stranger, and behold, his spirit was insensibly lending itself to the influences with which the air was alive. He recalled that he had been a huntsman when

he was young, and the freshness of those far-off dawns when he had lain in wait for the fox on the edge of a clearing came back to his memory with their odors of dead leaves and damp grasses. It was a long time since he had thought of that, long since he had found himself thus, alone and motionless, amid the rustling and the fragrance of thousands of lives of which we are unaware. Something strange passed over him, a slight displacement as it were of his spiritual axis, and the touch of the warm, mossy soil set running through his dry limbs a tremor of well-being that seemed like youth.

Stretching his neck he could see, between two hawthorn bushes, the bordering meadow bathed in that fair, liquid light that issues from between two clouds. Gotton was there, upright in the golden shower, against an overcast horizon. She looked as fresh and radiant as a beautiful image in her green and blue striped petticoat and her little figured fichu of the color of faïence knotted behind her white swelling neck. Connixloo considered her for a long time and little by little he almost forgot why he had come to lie in wait in the wood; he forgot Gotton; he saw again Jeanne Maers whom God had taken from him, he believed, because she had stood in the way of his salvation: Jeanne Maers, beautiful as a morning in May, as a meadow all in flower, as a garden bursting into blossom. He remembered that it was just so that he had prowled about her, hidden himself to watch her at his ease, to quench the thirst which he

had for seeing her, those days of his twentieth year when, on fire with love as he was, he had not dared to make his proposal. And at a single bound, in a single wave, as if he had never made pilgrimages nor burned candles in order to obtain forgetfulness of Jeanne, the impassioned recollections of his marriage invaded his whole being: again he saw the young bride, smiling and timid, on the nuptial bed, turning toward him that radiant face like a great rose which his kisses could not crush. That vision, with all the amorous and delightful frenzy it evoked, so profoundly agitated him that he longed to walk, to talk in order to dominate the violence of desire and to recover his own true self, Connixloo, the chorister and bell-ringer, the man without weaknesses, whom no woman was able to make deviate by a hair's-breadth from the straight path. But the necessity of remaining hidden, of keeping his watch, recalled him to the present: he had come to keep his eye on Gotton, whom he suspected of being a prey to that same fever, to that same fiery delirium the remembrance of which had just disturbed his own blood. Angrily he smothered that strange, momentary apparition of dream and vertigo; he ground his teeth and felt increasing in him the detestation which he had for these errors of the flesh whose redoubtable enticings had just humiliated him.

Gotton had descended to the edge of the road and, shading her eyes with her hand, she seemed to be looking and waiting for the approach of someone.

Connixloo watched her, his eyes strained, his heart throbbing. And, sure enough, at the turning of the road, he saw rising a silhouette which he recognized at once; it was the lame blacksmith of Iseghem, whom he had seen the afternoon before. This time he carried on his shoulder two great pickaxes. He was walking quickly. Perhaps he would only bid her good-day in passing; he had the air of going to his work. But no: he approached Gotton, climbed over the ditch to meet her in the meadow. He was quite near her now; he seemed to be talking to her, his eyes plunged in hers. Connixloo distinctly saw his blue shirt, his black leather apron, his red beard; he saw his gestures which seemed to express at once entreaty and disappointment; but he could not catch a single word. What were they saying that was so important? Connixloo had expected bursts of laughter, a little flirtation, some jokes. And there they were, both of them, speaking in low voices, sadly, one would have said, and Gotton, with her head hanging, had an air of not knowing what was going to happen to her. At the end of about a quarter of an hour, she turned toward the cows, which were grazing at the upper end of the meadow, and drew the blacksmith after her. Together they stood looking at the beautiful tawny beasts, with their rosy, swelling udders, and Gotton began to stroke one of them on the forehead.

Then the blacksmith excitedly took her head between his two hands and overwhelmed her face with a storm of kisses. She did not resist him; her ingenuous

arms encircled the frame of this man and, like a still innocent Eve, she let herself be embraced in the open field, before the vast horizon, in the free, light flow of the breeze, without even thinking of seeking shelter under the foliage of the little wood.

Connixloo rose up between the hawthorn bushes; he was choking with indignation. He would have bounded forward; but he was not armed, and this man, this lame fellow, had the shoulders of a wrestler, and could kill him with one stroke of a pickaxe.

Frozen with fear and shame, he trembled, and his fury only increased because he did not dare to move. The unknown one was still pressing Gotton's temples between his hands, and their embrace was not yet ended.

At last she seemed to shudder and straightened her neck again; he let her disengage herself. Then she looked at him smiling, with the beautiful young smile, shy and radiant, that Jeanne Maers had had—and on the rough shoulder she placed her golden head.

Connixloo could endure it no longer. He fled away through the wood. The man and the girl turned about at the sound of the hastily trodden branches, and the man said: "It's the roe, Gotton, looking for its hind."

When Gotton had brought the cows home, she lighted the fire in the great low chamber which smelt of leather and bacon. She hung up the pot, by a double chain, to two hooks fixed at the right and left of the fireplace, and began to peel on her knees the onions and potatoes for the evening soup. She was

surprised and pleased that her father was not in his customary place at the shoemaker's table. The solitude prolonged in her the echo of the strange words that she had heard, words that were terrifying and delightful: "I am hungry and thirsty for you. Since I saw you at the harvest at Iseghem, I have never had a day of peace; you can't understand the pain it is. Every day beside the other one, disgust poisons me more and more, and it seems to me that my whole life has passed into my desire for you. That can't go on, you see, Gotton; if only you could understand this pain, you would know that it couldn't go on."

No, Gotton did not know, did not understand; but as her shining, artless glance plunged into the eyes of the man who spoke to her thus, she saw burning there a warm, palpitating, fascinating flame that astonished and lured her as had once the purple fires of the mysterious old church windows. Still she defended herself; she said: "But your wife? . . . But your children? . . . But my father? . . ." And he murmured more ardently: "I love you!" At times also, he answered her directly: "My wife will go to live with her parents, who are rich and have never helped us. She hasn't the least affection for me; she will only be angry, not sorry. It will do her good to be able to say evil things about me. And your father? . . . But your father doesn't love you; he guards you like a goldpiece, like a thing that might be stolen from him. As for me, I love you. . . . You are for me like my own eyes, like my own blood."

And he made plans for the future. He explained: "The smithy at Meulebeke has been for sale ever since the blacksmith died two years ago. I have the whole custom of the village; I work for Meulebeke as well as for Iseghem, and I have put a little aside, thanks to beating the iron. I could buy the smithy now. We could live there together; you would never see your old acquaintances any longer and no one would make any trouble for you."

Yesterday he had told her this again, and she, knowing that she could no longer find in herself the strength to resist, had been on the point of saying to her father: "I love that man, that lame man, whom you saw walking along the road. He has just been with me. He wants to carry me off to live with him, although he is married. Don't say anything evil of him, but see what you can do." Yes, she had been on the point of speaking, for she was afraid to commit a sin; but she had not been able: her father was too unfeeling, too hard, too inalterable, and then perhaps he wouldn't have the courage. She had felt the afternoon before, when he had finished questioning her, that he would try to escape, that he would not listen to her.

To-day, she had not tried to argue with this man; she had no longer had the strength to say no, and she found she was no longer strong enough to leave him. To his wild entreaties she had only responded with a murmur: "We shall be damning ourselves." He had closed her mouth with kisses.

How pale and dim the twilight seemed through the window!

The soup was boiling now in the pot. Why had her father not yet come home? Gotton arranged the bread, beer and cheese on the table. She felt dull and sad, lost in this present moment that was uprooting her from the past and beyond which everything was uncertain. Even her gestures bespoke the confusion in her mind. For a long time she remained standing at the corner of the table, gazing at the fragment of sky framed by the little squares of the window. From the depths of the shadowy room this blue ember of the evening seemed like an eye, tender, burning, insistent, full of secrets. With a great shudder, Gotton finally turned about and lighted the lamp.

Just then the door opened and Connixloo appeared, ghastly white, his teeth chattering.

"Ah! There you are! Wanton!" he said, in a voice low and trembling with fury. "You dare to enter your father's house? Hide your face then!"

Gotton, standing before the fire, looked at him petrified. At last she said:

"Father, I wanted to tell you everything yesterday. It was you who stopped me. And what have you been doing to-day?"

"What have I been doing to-day, hussy? Is it for me to give an account to you? I know what I have been doing. I know you've let yourself be embraced by rascals on the open road; that you've rubbed your-

self like a wanton against a man who doesn't look as if he wanted to marry you. And, what's more, a cripple!"

Gotton did not respond. Connixloo, who was cold and haggard, helped himself to a basin of soup to fortify his trembling body. While he was swallowing it in great gulps, Gotton, crouching on a stool in the corner of the hearth, watched him in a fixed silence while he was turning over in his mind those words, that half confession, which she had just uttered—"Father, I would have told you everything." Had she committed the irreparable error? Was it too late to frighten her? Did there remain nothing but to cast her forth and consume his shame before the whole parish? As on the day before, Connixloo was afraid. "No, no," he said to himself; "no avowals, no confessions, no talking!" He feared the cunning or the audacity which this simple girl, like all the others, would exercise if only she were in love. Above all, he did not want to hear the verdict of dishonor. "There is still time to prevent the worst," he thought. "That man did not embrace her at once. It even took them quite a while to come to it; it had the look of being the first time. I can break it off short by showing her that I am the master."

He wished with all his might to remain the one who commands and chastises, and how he trembled, nevertheless, for fear that he might be so no longer! How he trembled lest he might hear her say: "What is done is done; you can no longer prevent anything!"

No, once more, there must be no questions. It was too dangerous. In his anger and the frightened agitation of his thoughts, he guarded with a masculine simplicity his faith in violence. Love, to his rustic, ascetic soul, appeared as a temptation altogether base, brutal, carnal, which ought to be crushed in the body. When he had swallowed his soup, he passed into the rear chamber and came back with the stick with which he had formerly punished the smallest offenses.

That evening Gotton was severely beaten. She had not asked forgiveness before the chastisement; she was not even surprised that her body, so lately transfigured by the warm glory of love, should now have to undergo this cruel injury. Standing before the hearth, her arm resting on the mantle-shelf, she bent her back under the blows and the fire lighted with a red reflection her face and her hair. Connixloo struck with all his might, relieving his anger. "Wanton, wanton!" he repeated between his teeth, and his breath came short. She, meanwhile, her body pierced with sharp pains like intercrossed flashes of lightning, felt in this sudden hurricane an alleviation of her trouble. More and more she bent herself over, and as her head drew near the embers she saw, outlining itself among them, a face with red hair, flushed cheeks, large, distended nostrils; she saw appearing there the burning, generous eyes, the eyes of the man to whom she was going to belong.

When the bell-ringer had tired his arms, he let his stick fall and said:

"Now, hide yourself, and be afraid at least, even if you are not ashamed!"

She straightened herself painfully and looked him straight in the face with a glance in which there was neither fear nor shame; then she dragged herself away toward her room, supporting herself against the wall.

The night had grown entirely dark. That evening, for the first time since the one when Jeanne Connixloo had quitted this world, the parish-folk of Metsys put out their fires without having heard the Angelus ring.

As the night was drawing to a close, Gotton, who had slept a few hours, rose noiselessly and put her face to the little window of her room. The barley-fields which spread out on this side were still black, but the horizon was beginning to grow pale and it seemed as if the night were slowly lifting from the earth her shadowy wings. Aloft the sky was full of stars, the stars that rise in the deserted hours of the night and whose faces Gotton did not recognize. She was surprised at their unfamiliar aspect and she felt a sort of vague satisfaction to see that it was not the old stars of every evening that were watching her depart. One moment she remained with her head resting on the window-sill, dreaming of what she was going to do. She heard, quite close to her, the cows rustling the hay in the black stable and lowing indolently. The first crow of the cock, shrill and dreary, made her start and harshly reawoke her nerve for action. She had no time to lose. In less than two

hours Connixloo would be getting up for the morning Angelus. She dressed herself, putting on her newest dress, saying to herself that for a long time perhaps she would not have another one. Then, feeling her way, for she was afraid to light a candle, she made up a little bundle of clothes: a few chemises and two or three handkerchiefs, which she tied up in a fichu. Then she took her sabots in her hand and half-opened the door of her room. The size of the entrance chamber which stretched out before her and which she would now have to cross seemed to her immense. The deep silence and that gray tinge that was beginning to glide over the surface of things seemed treacherous and formidable. Gotton, seized with anguish, turned back to the window of her room. If only she did not have to cross that kitchen! But no, the window was too small, it was not to be thought of. Then she ventured forth again, her heart beating, among the invisible obstacles, the phantoms of the past, the memories of fear and subjection with which the place was peopled. In her worsted stockings her feet made no sound on the tile floor. Involuntarily her eyes fixed themselves on her father's table where the thread, the pieces of leather, the pliers and the awl were spread. In a half-hallucination she saw him sitting on the wooden stool, his long, thin legs stretched under the table, his shoulders bent over his work. It seemed as if he might turn about suddenly and demand in his crabbed voice: "Where in the world are you going at this hour, Gotton?" And

all the same she anxiously strained her ears, knowing that in reality her father was asleep in the back room but that his sleep was never heavy and that the tiny footfall of a mouse would make him start up. To open the door was terrifying. Gotton turned the rusty key twice in the lock and drew the iron latch with the sensation that in that second lay the whole of her destiny. Connixloo in his room gave no sign of awakening and already through the half-open door the fresh, pure morning burst upon the face of the young girl and stilled her heart.

She went out, put on her sabots, then took a long breath. The little square was deserted and silent. Nothing was to be heard but the murmur of the fountain under the lime-trees. The flowers at the window were beginning to take on a dim color, but the houses, the church had an ashen air, a strange pallor on their sorrowful faces. Without looking back, her little bundle in her hand, Gotton committed herself to the road over which, for all the days before, she had led her cows to pasture. She did not walk quickly; she felt pain in her bones; but this ache was almost the only thing left to remind her of the blows of the evening. From her heart it was as if all feeling of fear, humiliation and bitterness had been washed away; there existed in it only the joy of at last simply and bravely obeying her instinct, of having shattered the chains that chafe one's hope and of walking alone in the clear dawn toward the unknown glory of love.

The road was long to Iseghem and straight between the beet-fields and the fields of barley waving in the breeze. Gazing at the undulating grain, which was already high, Gotton remembered the last harvest in these same fields, those long wearisome days and the hours of sunset when the girls returned to the village almost staggering, and scattered along the road their tired laughter.

She thought of the day when she had gone alone, during the midday rest, to the forge of Iseghem because the ring that fastened the blade of the scythe to the handle was broken and she could not go on with her work any more. Again she saw the shadowy opening of that forge, yawning beside the road, which was flooded with sunlight, the great square of blackness where for a moment she could scarcely distinguish even the naked arms and the red beard of the blacksmith.

"When must you have this scythe?" he asked her. He spoke in a strange voice, nervous, joyous, fierce. She had responded timidly:

"We begin work again in an hour."

"In an hour? And when do you expect me to have my dinner? Well, I see you're counting on it; come back in an hour."

His cordial accent had emboldened her and she had replied:

"Bring it to me instead, as soon as you've finished it. I am in the Widow Rosalie's field and I'll give you your dinner with the harvesters."

"I hear the harvesting isn't dull this year. Well! It's agreed!"

He had come; she had served him his food and poured out his beer. And after that she had often met him on the roads and sometimes, between the piles of sheaves, she had seen him watching her without speaking. When she met this glance her head swam; for a second her eyes could not see any longer, her knees wavered, her heart melted in her breast. But this vertigo did not last: it was like the passing of a strange force, a burning spirit that overthrew her with a stroke of its wing and at once resumed its flight. She recalled all this and thought also how, at the approaching harvest, if he permitted her still to hire herself out, he would come to meet her at nightfall and that instead of returning with the girls she would walk slowly with her lover, toward the unknown shelter of their ardent repose.

She was drawing near Iseghem, the thatched roofs of which she saw grouped on the plain. A few clusters of trees rose up, at wide intervals, among the fields, or more often a screen of poplars skirting the gray and shining mirror of a canal. The little hills on the horizon, two delicate swellings like the breasts of a child of thirteen, bore each a windmill. The stiff wings of white canvas began to turn gayly on the milky border of the western sky, and when the sun rose opposite and seemed to make the green earth resound with a great clash of cymbals, the two mills were lighted up with quivering wheels of pink rays.

Gotton had to cross Iseghem to reach the road to Meulebeke. There she would wait. He whom she was seeking had said to her the day before: "I work as much for Meulebeke as for Iseghem; in fact, I have to go there to-morrow to shoe some horses before I begin my work at the forge."

In the village the cocks were crowing, the last song of the dawn, and their voices, answering one another from farm to farm, rent the azure calm. Some young boys were harnessing up their teams and setting out for the fields. Gotton walked past the forge: she looked at the black opening which she had only entered once, that midday at the last harvest. Above it, the green shutters of the windows were closed; no sign of life appeared in the house. Was the blacksmith still sleeping beside his wife? Gotton, with a mischievous smile in her clear eyes, thought: "It's the last hour of the last night!" And as she continued her way she kept her mind's eye fixed harshly on the image of that woman, that Gertrude Moorslede who was ugly and slovenly, who never spoke except to complain and dragged her feet as she walked. She did not think of the children; her willful soul was not ready for remorse that day.

The road from Iseghem to Meulebeke ran along a canal bordered by poplars, separated from it only by a strip of pastureland. Two fallen trunks lay side by side in the grass. Gotton sat down and began her wait. She waited a long time. Although the sun had risen, it was cold; the thick grass drenched her to the

ankles. She lifted her hand to her hair: it was wet with dew. The fatigue of the walk added to the lameness of all her limbs; for a moment she was on the point of weeping. A barge, hauled from the bank by a feeble old horse, glided along the canal. The master, standing among the piles of merchandise, regarded her at his leisure. A few men on foot passed along the road; they, too, looked at her, and she was ashamed, for she felt that, with her little bundle of clothes and her chilled face, she must have the air of a girl who had been driven from home. But no one said anything to her. For the first time she was alone in the world and shelterless, and she felt growing in her a desire more profound, more painful than anything she had ever known to take refuge in the arms of the man she loved. "But when will he come?" she sighed from the depths of her heart, and the tears overflowed her eyes.

At last, along the deserted road, that blue blouse, that unrhythmical step. . . . It was he! She rose, advanced to meet him and, with lips that trembled a little, said to him: "Luke Heemskerck, let it be with me now in all ways according to your pleasure."

He stood a moment contemplating her, too startled to speak to her; he looked at her blue lips, her forehead damp with dew, her cheeks damp with tears; then, with a fierce, hungry spring he enclosed her in his powerful arms.

* * * *

The second Sunday after Gotton had taken flight

from her father's house, the priest of Metsys, having finished his homily on the gospel of the day, coughed in his red handkerchief and said:

"Brethren, charity does not compel me to hold my peace with you concerning the scandal that has just desolated our parish; but rather it compels me to condemn it before you and to exhort you with a renewed vigor to hate this sin of fornication against which, from the first to the last page, the Holy Scriptures never cease to inveigh. A daughter of our parish has quitted for the stinkpots of adultery the perfume of a sainted hearth. If she comes back to us some day repentant and ready to do penance, God will inspire us to pardon her. But let not the pity that is shed upon the breast of the contrite sinner be confused in your eyes with that culpable indulgence for the sin which has grown so common among the lukewarm souls of this generation. Remember, brethren, that the horror of the sin ought to extend even to the sinner himself, so long as he does not disavow his crime and continues to insult the law of God. Remember that the adulteress should be shunned more strictly than a leper because it is a leprosy of the soul which she is in danger of communicating. Have, then, no conversation or intercourse with her, let not her name be pronounced in a Christian home. Thus, brethren, you will perhaps serve her soul, since God does not disdain to utilize the chastisement for the conversion of the sinner—and more surely still you will serve your own souls and those of your children whom it is your

mission to keep securely in the pathway of heaven. May it be so!"

This anathema was heard by the parishioners of Metsys in a profound silence which covered very diverse feelings. The young girls lowered their eyes and their faces, which expressed all the subtleties of feminine confusion. The simpler ones had only a sense of discomfort mingled with that intense curiosity which agitates a child before whom a comrade is about to be whipped. The more pious blushed painfully in the presence of the glimpsed evil. But those who already knew or divined something of love shuddered to think that that which passed so mysteriously and so poignantly in the secrecy of their heart and in that profound and hidden sense which has no name, could blaze out so before the eyes of all and suddenly assume that face of infamy.

Among the men, a few felt an inclination to laugh, and those who were burdened with evil thoughts said to themselves: "Is it because he has a tender feeling for the little one that he is so severe in his anger?" The others seemed profoundly pained. The mothers pressed their lips tight and turned their heads in order to shed on all sides their signs of approbation. Yes, indeed, these latter censured Gotton and dragged her in the mire before their daughters; but they were also remembering their own matronly counsels: "Remarry, Connixloo; you'll never in the world be able to bring up a girl all alone!" She who had waited so long drew herself up now and straightened her shoulders

with an air that signified: "If I had been there this would never have happened. I've always said that men are lacking in good sense."

The whole parish fell on their knees when the priest descended to his seat and in the silence that followed, while at the foot of the altar he resumed his vestments in order to intone the Creed, they heard several brief sobs. It was Connixloo, weeping in his choir-stall, his head between his hands.

CHAPTER II

LUKE HEEMSKERCK had bought the little house of the former blacksmith of Meulebeke. Behind the forge there was a large room, paved with red tiles, where he ate and slept with Gotton. In the rear of this chamber was an old oaken circular stairway which led to a loft where the hoard of old iron was piled up near some old vegetables under ropes for drying clothes.

Gotton had taken possession of this dwelling without a day of homelessness. The solitude did not surprise her; she had been used to it at Metsys. Her occupations were scarcely changed: washing, mending, cooking; nothing was lacking but the cows to care for and drive to the meadow; but Luke Heemskerck had promised her some chickens and a lamb which she was going to feed in the garden and which would keep her company. She submitted to Luke as from her childhood she had always submitted to her father; but the happiness of this loving submission was so new, so unguessed that often, in the midst of her household work, she stopped to let the fullness of her heart overflow in silence. Thus, her inner gladness was the only thing to which she was not accustomed.

During the first days she had feared some violence from her father, or simply some painful and embarrassing occurrence like a visit from the priest, an attempt at persuasion. But nothing of this sort happened. Since the morning when she had left her father's house she was, for Metsys, as if at the other end of the world. In Meulebeke she went out seldom. Everybody in the village knew her story; they pointed their fingers at her and no one addressed to her a word of good will. Nevertheless, she did her washing at the fountain, in the village square, and although she contrived to go there very early, she always met a few gossips. They nudged each other with their elbows as she approached; they even went so far as to insult her: "Hey, girl, you have brass to come and wash the linen of your bed with the linen of honest folk."

"Perhaps," she would reply slowly, "it is better to be happy than honest, since it isn't those who are happy who think up spiteful things to say."

She made her reply so proudly and with such animation that she closed the mouth of zeal. She saw that these women who abused her could not look at her without envy. She knew now that she was beautiful; the love which she inspired was before the eyes of all like the raiment of a princess, like a suit of armor. She knew that she walked like no other woman, with an ample, rhythmic movement of the hips, light and strong, and that Luke was intoxicated at the mere sight of her going or coming. Away

from him she became haughty; near him love, humble, ardent, voluptuous, and simple, alone dominated her whole being. Too carried away by passion to be coquettish, she forgot her beauty and served in silence her master the blacksmith.

She loved to see him at the forge, upright, his sleeves rolled back to his shoulders, beating with great blows the white hot iron and striking showers of sparks from the anvil. Often, when she had finished her work in the living-room or in the little garden where she was raising some vegetables, she would come, her knitting in her hands, and seat herself near the door, at the back of the forge, and watch him. The sound of his breathing between the blows went through her like a flame. Sometimes customers would enter and engage Heemskerck in conversation; but when they suddenly observed the presence of Gotton in the dark shadow they were seized with uneasiness and cut the interview short. This beautiful sinful girl, with her intense look, for them vaguely represented Venus, the she-devil whom the pagans worshiped and for whom so many men had lost their souls.

The day ended, Luke would often say to Gotton: "Would you like to take a stroll?" And Gotton, who scarcely dared to go out alone because of the evil talk, smiled in acknowledgment and went to change her apron. Then they would set out, arm in arm, by a footpath that led off behind their garden right across the fields where, as far as one could see on that

side, there was nothing but the plain, green or motley, yellow or red or even blue according to the hour and the season. In spring, Luke would pass branches of hawthorn through the knot of Gotton's hair to see her bright face laughing at him out of a whole bush of white flowers. In a low voice he spoke to her in words of passion and refreshed against her neck and cheeks a head that was inflamed by the fire of the forge. Happy and docile, she lent herself to the violence of his caresses. She was like a flower, always fresh, unimpaired, resplendent under the insatiable tempest of love. But he had a way of looking at her now and then, savagely and almost sadly, that frightened her. She had remained a little shy with him because he was so much older than she and so strong, so active, so resolute! Under the harshness of her father she had always felt the uneasiness of a timid nature: the fear of hell, the fear of public gossip, the fear of women's wiles and of their ardor were the true sources of the virtue and the severities of Connixloo. But this Heemskerck, with his inspired eyes, seemed indeed to have no fear of anything. He was a solitary man, accustomed to effort, to difficulty, who, ten hours a day, often half naked and streaming with sweat, bent the iron to his will. Leaning on his arm Gotton felt herself protected.

In the course of their evening walks, he had told her of the hard life which he had led and which had made him tenacious and strong-willed.

"You have never asked me, Gotton, why I am lame.

I was not born this way, you know, and it is not my mother's fault, my poor little girl, if your man goes hobbling along. My father had a forge near Bruges. As for me, I was a boy who was growing up quite straight, the youngest of four brothers. When I was ten years old I had a quarrel one day with my oldest brother. He was strong and violent. He seized the hammer of the forge and flung me a blow across the legs. I fell down, stiff, senseless. They carried me to my bed. I had a broken thigh. I remained three months on my back. They did not call in a doctor, no one cared for me; they brought me something to eat and that was all. My eldest brother was working at the forge and already earning money, and my parents didn't want to make him angry. The first days I screamed without stopping. Then the pain diminished. I waited patiently for it to be patched up; at night I would try the ground with my foot to see whether it had got back its strength, whether it would support me. When I was able to hold myself up on my legs, I found that one of them was shorter than the other, with a great hard knot like a stone on the side. Then I clearly understood that it wouldn't do for me to stay in the house where my brother had made me like that. I wasn't willing to hobble behind the others who would always have outstripped me in life. I left one night without a sou, like a vagabond, to betake myself elsewhere, I did not know where, to earn by bread. Not once did I beg. Before evening on the first day. I had the luck

to hire myself out at a farm to care for the work-horses and look after the stable. I stayed there two years; I worked for my board and I never saw an écu. That didn't satisfy me and I always cherished the idea of setting up a forge like my father, for I loved a work that you can do all alone and in which you are your own master.

"Then, too, in this work it's the arms that count, and I thought that a lame fellow would be no more awkward there than anyone else. Well, from time to time I would go for a day, or for two days, to look in one village and another for a place as blacksmith's apprentice. When I came back, they always told me that they were going to discharge me, that they believed I had gone to spend the night with the girls, who had been buying me drinks! And then they would keep me just the same, because I worked well. It was at Malines that I found my chance, one day when my master had sent me there to deliver to a horse-dealer two work-horses that he was going to sell to him. A blacksmith in the quarter took me into his shop, and when I had reached my sixteenth year he got me a place with the blacksmith of Iseghem, who was old and was no longer able to do his work alone. Soon he left the whole place to me. I earned money there. I thought I had come to the end of my hardships. And then I got married, and, the devil! I saw that I had only made the beginning of them."

Gotton listened, recalling her own childhood, calm and monotonous, and the dreams of her twelve years

in the church at Metsys. And she thought that both of them, he after so many struggles and difficulties, she after so many dreams, had only been preparing themselves for these days of love. This thought made her all the more beautiful every hour. In the garden, watering a little rosebush that she had newly planted, a stalk dry, gray, thorny, which Luke had brought back to her from Malines, she would say to herself, meditating on her own destiny: "It does not know that it will soon bear roses. We did not know, either."

* * * * *

At the end of two years, Gotton said to Luke:

"God has not blessed us; we have no children." It was in these words that she expressed for the first time the anxiety which for several months had troubled her heart. At first this had been only a fleeting thought, a brief pang in the midst of her happiness. And then she said to herself: "We have plenty of time!" But time brought nothing, and Gotton began to foresee that perhaps this would go on always and that she might grow old beside Luke without hope. Then she felt herself walled up in this felicity that had no horizon; it seemed to her that her joy had closed about her like a tomb. All her vigor, all her tenderness longed for the travail of motherhood, for the bearing, nourishing, rearing of children. She desired them for herself with the deepest instinct of her nature and she desired them for Luke who had, because of her, abandoned his own. There were hours when she felt jealous of that Gertrude Moorslede who had given

them to him and whom she knew that she had wronged. If she had borne children herself, her little ones would have protected her from remorse: they would have had such need of Luke! And they would have protected her also, she thought, from public scorn. With children, she would have been almost the equal of other women, a mother rather than a mistress. They would cease to point their fingers at her; they would perhaps forget the scandal. . . . Even as a mistress she felt troubled: she feared lest with Luke the ardor of pleasure would soon spend itself, that he would be seized with disgust for a sterile bed, and her own life seemed to her as dreary as a year that has no seasons.

This secret sorrow made her more sensitive to the signs of hostility which she received every day. The people of Meulebeke were not accustomed to scandal; they had not made their peace with the adulterous ones. Not one family had opened its door to Gotton; not one woman had entered hers. When she crossed the threshold of a shop the customers hastened to finish their purchases and did not conceal their annoyance. They would remark as they went out: "We are not used here to meeting fallen girls," to which the shopkeeper would reply: "They say it takes every kind to make a world; that does not keep me from preferring to serve honest folk." One day when Gotton laid her money on the counter of the baker's wife, the latter said, as she gathered it up: "How about the little Heemskercks; have they enough money

to go to the bakery with?" Shafts like this sank with a quiver into her soul.

And Gotton's eyes were now growing hard, and that beautiful balanced walk of hers had taken on almost an air of insolence. All her dreams concentrated more and more on that great revenge: the pride of being a mother. A little child cradled between her arms, a little warm tender face clinging to her white, veined breast, that was the vision upon which she fed, this despised girl, as she walked through the village where not one face smiled at her. And the vision grew: there were several children, three, four, hanging on Gotton's skirts, but there was always one quite new, quite tiny, which could lie from his head to his feet between the two elbows that rocked him. Oh, the adorable weakness of it! Oh, the proud abundance of it! In the pain of this longing, her former thoughts, almost forgotten since the first joys of love, suddenly revived with all their sting. That state of sin, which she had feared so much before she had committed her error, again disturbed her conscience and her peace of mind, and at moments she asked herself in terror if a malediction from on high had not dried up her entrails.

Months passed during which she did not dare to mention her anguish to the blacksmith. But sometimes, coming back from his errands, he would find her sitting with her head in her hands and weeping. So long as he was working at the forge, the feeling of his presence drove back her grief; she would go to

watch him, as in the first days, smiting the anvil, and so regarding him in silence she felt her heart satisfied. But the days when Luke made his journeys among the neighboring villages, or sometimes in the city, her spirit went roaming in a solitude where there was nothing to shield her any longer from her melancholy. The miscarriage of her womanhood reopened the gate of recollection and many things she might have believed forgotten came back to her memory, haloed with sorrow. She recalled the peaceful days she had passed in the fields when, among the scabiouses and the daisies, she had been herself flower-like in the tranquillity of her blood. She had been afraid of her father, her life with him had been tedious, she had been beaten sometimes—yes, that was true; but nevertheless, all that life before her love seemed to her from afar like something fresh and serene, with a secret radiance! She would not have changed things, she would not have gone back to that past time; but she said to herself all the same that she had not realized how good it was. She remembered again the chimes which every quarter of an hour blossomed on the air like a little flower of music with six petals, and how all the flowers formed a bright garland suspended between dawn and eventide. And then those lovely chimes of Sunday, so deep at first, then gradually louder, sharper, more importunate, more buoyant, as if to hasten the steps of the parish folk who from all the farms came to the church. She happened to hear them again one Sun-

day morning when the wind blew strong and came from Metsys. Then she distinguished the voice of the great bell which rang first and seemed to say: "Leave your cattle-sheds; remove from your feet the sabots encrusted with mud and dung!" and after it the other bells whose voices reached her in swift ethereal confusion, those silver bells which spoke of a joyous ascension from this heavy world toward the regions where the souls of men sing with the angels. Gotton listened and dreamed, but she did not change her everyday petticoat, nor her sabots; she was not going to church. She would not have believed that she could have come to miss it so much. Then she thought of the church of Metsys; she longed to see her curé again, his hands piously raised, chanting the Preface. She recalled with this image the confused impression given her by those incomprehensible Latin words, resounding so richly in the choir of carved wood—the antique melody, at once strange and familiar, that seemed to animate with a magic life the personages that swarmed on the altar-screen, the figures on the capitals. Again she saw the stained-glass windows, those quivering enigmas that had sparkled over her childhood and awakened her first dreams, those jewels, those inextinguishable embers—what sorcery! How she had longed to share in their ardor! And when she had known the passionate glance of Luke, she had believed that she had found a hearth where the same fire burned—a hearth quite near, quite human, in which her soul might kindle itself, might

also become radiant and fiery! . . . In the first days of their love, it had been her innermost joy to feel that her passion was watching over her, in the midst of the solitude, the monotonous labor, the misty days, and even in the very depths of sleep. It seemed to her that indeed her soul had become incandescent, and that there was as great a difference between a corpse and one who has risen from the dead as between the young girl she had been and the creature of love that she had become. But now she realized that love has not the fixedness of gems and that if it cannot grow and feed itself like flame it is smothered drearily among the cinders.

Several months had slipped by since Gotton had confessed to the blacksmith the grief which made her heart heavy. They did not speak of it between themselves; but Luke saw that Gotton was often absorbed, that her mouth had assumed a dejected curve and that the radiance of youth had begun to fade in her face. He did not love her less ardently, but the feeling that she was unsatisfied plunged him into fits of gloomy melancholy which she observed in her turn and attributed to a regret like her own. Her anxiety and distress increased all the more.

Winter had come and they were approaching the festival of Christmas. One evening Luke, sitting down to the table for dinner, said to Gotton: "What do you say to our going to Malines together for Christmas Eve? I hear there's to be a great bell-

ringing festival there and that all the bells in the city are going to sound together." Gotton thought a moment before answering. Malines? She had never been there. She imagined a great crowd in which she would be hurried along, people who would speak to her without knowing her story, churches where she would dare to enter and kneel down among the Christian folk. With gratitude she told Luke that she would love to go to the celebration. For three days she dreamed of it, tasting in advance those hours when, lost in the strange throng, she would cast off the weight of public scorn. When the moment came, they set out together and reached on foot the nearest railway station. A thick mist warmly enveloped the earth. Gotton, her forehead resting on the glass of their third-class compartment, watched the wet fields flying past, veiled in cottony whiteness, amid which the poplars seemed like rushing ghosts. At the end of about three-quarters of an hour she stepped down with Luke at the Malines station. The fog was even denser in the town than over the fields. They were lighting the street-lamps. Gotton was astonished at all these spheres of milky light strung along the sidewalks like pearls on a necklace. It seemed to her marvelously beautiful. Luke led her off at random through the streets, where most of the shops, even when they were closed, were brilliantly illuminated behind their show-windows.

At a little cross-street, they stopped before an inn of modest appearance, the sign of which bore a basket

of vegetables and beneath the inscription in French and Flemish, "The Garden of Rubens." They entered and engaged a room for the night and two places for the Christmas Eve revel. Then they resumed their aimless stroll, crossing unknown streets where the passers-by rose up and vanished like phantoms in the mist. They jostled against townsfolk of Malines, peasants from the heart of Flanders, and rich foreigners, spectacled Germans and smooth-faced Americans accompanied by slender young women whose bold and agile beauty was set off by jewelry. Gotton stopped a moment in an eddy of the crowd, among these foreign folk, looking at them with infinite admiration. Suddenly she blushed with astonishment and pleasure as she perceived that these splendid creatures were also staring in admiration at her. With a quick intuition she divined what they were saying about her, although she was unable to understand the words they exchanged as they passed: "Beautiful Flemish girl!" "Ach mein lieb'! Sieh'st du was für ein schöner Rubens!"

The novelty of the situation gave her a sort of intoxication. For a long time, Luke had not seemed so gay. His shining eyes, in the powdery dampness of the fog, wandered over things with a look of enthusiasm, his step was quick. From time to time, she half turned about and leaned on Luke's arm with a movement full of tenderness and joy.

Toward seven o'clock they dined and Luke made her drink some wine.

At eight o'clock, the bells began to ring. At first came clear, equal notes that soared aloft from second to second, as if to feel the upper air before the full chorus of the chimes flung itself forth. At the first sounds, silence fell on the throng and all heads were lifted as if they were about to see passing through the mist the wings of angels.

Then, one after another, the venerable bells of the city bestirred themselves, joining their voices with the voice that had sprung forth first, and all the sky was soon quickened with a vast vibration. The whole city sang; it filled space with the solemn joy of its heart. The ethereal waves glided one over another like the billows of a stream, flowing and rustling. It seemed as if the floodgates of some mystic river had been opened, a river of gladness and benediction for the vast multitude that dipped themselves in its pure ebullition. From every belfry in turn soared a strain that carried over the eddies of sound a melody which brought the ancient words of some Christmas carol surging to Flemish lips.

Gotton listened; the vibrations of the bells pierced her, dominated her whole soul. It seemed to her that something was in flight about her, poised in mid-heaven upon the wings of sound, far beyond her sorrows and her everyday joys. The modest art of the bell-ringer of Metsys had prepared her to understand the masters of Malines. At moments, she thought this evening of her father and of that bell-ringer's room in the steeple at Metsys whither, as a

little girl, she had often climbed with him to watch him pull the ropes, following a long and supple rhythm. She felt for him a stir of affection and imagined how happy he would be to pass a night like this in Malines. But it would not have been possible for him to come; he would have to sound the midnight mass in the village. . . . Unweariedly, Gotton led Luke through the opalescent fog, peopled with shadows and vibrant with music, to stop at the foot of every singing tower and enter every church. In the churches the crowds were assembling to hear the midnight mass; the candelabra were lighted; the vast buoyant harmonies of an organ, caressed by dreaming fingers, mingled themselves at times with the song of the bells. Gotton had never seen so many people gathered together; nor had she ever before experienced that fervent exaltation of the great Catholic festivals when one perceives in the sanctuaries the shining of eager souls. However, she did not stop in the crowd herself, nor did she attempt to pray. When she had watched for a moment, in some nave, the kneeling worshipers, their pious faces turned toward the altar, then the images, the lights, the still empty trough between Joseph and Mary, the shepherds and the little sheep, waiting until, at the midnight hour, an infant wrapped in swaddling-clothes would be placed there, she felt impelled to set out again in the white fog till she had found another church. The solemn hour was approaching when the priests would begin the celebration of the nocturnal mass when, in

one of the low aisles of a dark, narrow church which she had just entered with Luke, she stopped before a stand of tapers which were burning and dripping their wax, at the feet of an image of Our Lady. She looked at the Virgin Mary, delicate, smiling, under her lofty diadem, supporting against her frail and gently bending waist the knees of the Child whom she bore on her arm. Suddenly, Gotton turned pale under the sway of an intense emotion and her eyes grew big. In the first row of the worshipers, his full face lighted up by the long flames of the narrow candles that were consuming themselves all too quickly, she recognized her father. Her astonishment left no room for doubt: it was he, with his straight black hair, the four or five deep wrinkles that repeated precisely on his forehead the double arc of his eyes, his knotted temples, his brown eyes, too close together. But the face had aged; the narrow nostrils had taken on a look of old parchment, the furrows of the cheeks had grown hollower. Connixloo had fixed his glance fervently on the statue of the Virgin, and his lips were rapidly murmuring his prayers. In his upraised eyes Gotton saw the play of the reflected candles, but all at once the reflection was confused, the mirror of the eyes became entirely bright and two tears flowed over the yellow, wrinkled eyelids. The old chorister was weeping as he prayed to the Mother of all purity.

Gotton turned; she looked about for Luke: he was absorbed in contemplation before a picture in a neighboring chapel and had seen nothing. "Let us go,"

she said. He was astonished at her brusqueness and followed her anxiously. For her the charm was broken, the rapture spent; in an instant she had lost the illusion of being merged in the Christian multitude.

"I want to go back to the inn," she said to Luke, as soon as they were outside. "You can hear, the chimes have ceased; I am too tired to sit up any longer."

"What?" said Luke. "Don't you want to wait for the midnight mass?"

"Oh, no!" she answered. "My head's turning with all the things I've seen!"

They found the inn where the table was being prepared for the Christmas Eve revel. But they had no desire for supper now. They went to bed. When Luke was asleep beside her, Gotton no longer restrained her tears. A long time she wept, while below, around the roast goose, the laughter resounded. She could not distract her thoughts from that sorrowful face which had appeared to her out of the light of the candles, nor from that ardent prayer of which she did not doubt that she was the object. For the first time since she had lived with Luke, she felt not only frustrated, not only despised, but guilty.

Gotton resumed her life at the forge in Meulebeke without having told Luke of the encounter that had troubled her. She no longer spoke to him of the grief she felt at having no children. She loved him; she clung to the idea of not making him suffer and

also of putting off the hour when there would be born in him the regrets that seemed to her almost inevitable. Love, devotion, obedience filled from hour to hour a life of which she did not wish to interrogate the horizon. Nevertheless, when she was left alone, a wave of sorrow sometimes overflowed her heart.

One afternoon at the end of April when Luke, returning to the forge, had found her thus lost in her dreams and all in tears, he said to her in a low voice, as he kissed her hair: "Come, look, it is as beautiful as the time when you came to me; come and let us take a little stroll toward the woods." She let him lead her. They went up the little road that passed behind their garden, to avoid crossing the village; but soon they rejoined the highway. Luke, urged on by the memories which the blue spring day evoked, had taken the direction of the little wood adjoining Metsys to which, in the three years they had lived together, they had never once returned. Gotton seemed not to be noticing it, and she was silent. Together they watched their united shadows lengthening along the road, for the sun was sinking behind them, and the shadow of the lame man jerked fantastically at every step beside the harmonious shadow of Gotton. The oblique rays illuminated the whole green density of the meadows, dappled with daisies and buttercups. The orchards in flower poured out upon the air a tender, delicate perfume, and in places the white petals were flying on the breeze. The transfiguration

of this world, so dull, so ugly only a few weeks before—which was, indeed, in the ignorance of poor Gotton, the whole world—represented to her eyes the delights and the mysterious bliss of fecundity from which she was excluded. Nevertheless, the warm pallor of the sky and the perfumes that drifted over the landscape pervaded even the inmost recesses of her grief with a peaceful and voluptuous influence. Luke now spoke to her of his work, of the next orders he had to deliver, of his clientele, which was spreading through the neighborhood, and she replied calmly and soberly, like a wife attentive to the prosperity of the household. This conversation, in which the man distracted himself from his restless, amorous passion and the girl from her secret grief, gave them a sweet deep feeling of all their lives had in common. They found repose together in this humble aspect of their love. And now the little wood which Luke had wished to see again revealed itself over a rise on the plain, and further off—so slender, so light in the blue of the evening!—the belfry of Metsys. Then Luke stretched his arm about Gotton's waist and with one movement they hastened forward. They reached the exact spot they were seeking as the sun touched the horizon. The undergrowth was only a green confusion; but at the summits of the oaks, which were still perforated with the azure sky, the little golden leaves were like the flames of candles. The lovers had stopped, when they saw coming out of the wood a band of five children who were chas-

ing one another, shouting, to the road. The smallest, fair-haired and all disheveled, who was being left behind, though he was running desperately, bore in his arms a great bouquet of violet-colored orchids.

The blacksmith trembled at the sound of these young voices. The largest boy, who was leading the band, arriving at the edge of the road, stopped short in an attitude of intense astonishment. Then, quite low, Luke said to Gotton: "Do you recognize them?" And as he gazed he counted his children. They were indeed there, all of them: Jean-Baptiste, Catherine, Jean, Bernard and little Louis. They were beautiful; they had sparkling eyes, the blood was in their cheeks, their breath was coming short like that of young dogs after a chase. Having descended the slope, they had stopped, all five, at the white border of the road, and it seemed that even the smallest ones understood.

Luke was seized with a great desire to talk with his children. In a tone of unusual sweetness he called the eldest: "You there, Jean-Baptiste?" The child did not answer; his eyes fixed themselves with a savage hostility upon the couple standing a few yards away from him. Suddenly he leaned over, picked up a stone and threw it at Gotton. At once the five children, without uttering a sound, scampered off down the road like black hobgoblins against the red flare of the horizon.

Luke was springing after them, but Gotton fell on his shoulder with a dull cry, and her weight was so

inert that he thought she had been injured. Then, even as he supported her, he stooped as his son had done; but she threw both her arms about him and cried: "You're not going to throw stones at them, at your own children!"

Luke carried her and laid her down in the meadow to which he had come to breathe the memory of their first kisses.

"Where are you hurt?" he asked. "Where did he hit you?"

She hid her face in the grass and her whole body was agitated with long shudders and sobs. And as he repeated, "Where are you hurt?" she shook her head without being able to answer. He tried to caress her, but she repulsed him. He understood that it was from a lonely and long-hidden source that this flood of sorrow had overflowed; he felt himself in his turn alone and enfeebled. The sobs of the woman whom he loved and whose whole being he had believed united and merged with his, reached him as from the other edge of an abyss. Once more he leaned over her and at last heard the words flung up from the depths of her heart:

"Oh, Luke, you had them, those children; you left them for me, and I have not given you any others!"

He surrounded her with his arms, lifted up her head, covered it with passionate kisses.

"I love you," he said to her. "I care for nothing but you. Don't speak to me of those vermin! Never

speak to me again of that accursed child that struck you!"

She replied with vehemence:

"It is we that are accursed!"

And a new silence fell upon them. Then Luke murmured in a choking voice:

"Gotton, you have never said that to me. Are you no longer happy with me?"

Gotton placed her head upon Luke's breast as upon a sure refuge. The light wind of evening passed over her cheek, but under her head she felt the blacksmith's heart beating with great throbs. It seemed to her that everything in the world was indifferent or strange except that throbbing and that anvil of flesh upon which she had forged her own destiny. Without lifting her face or her closed eyelids, now all stilled in love, she said:

"Luke, I have a sorrow that you cannot heal. But I shall always belong to you."

CHAPTER III

FOR three weeks the scourge of the invasion had pursued its horrible course, marked with blood and ruin, across the fields of Belgium. And the tocsin was sounding at Metsys, at Meulebeke, at Iseghem, for they knew the enemy was near and that that evening, probably, he would enter the canton. A few families had left. After the departure of the young men, called to the army at the beginning of August, they had seen, moving off, day after day, the sad cart-loads of women and children, in their Sunday clothes, sitting among their heaped-up belongings, while the men walked behind and the eldest son led by the bridle the plow-horse, which was going to drag all the way to Antwerp, along the interminable dusty road, the poor remains of their abandoned homes. But as it was the time to get in the harvest, the greater number remained.

"Would you like to have us go?" Luke had said to Gotton. And Gotton had shaken her head. She said to herself: "It has taken all his savings to buy this forge so that we might live together. For three years, he has been able to save scarcely anything more. Elsewhere we should soon have to beg." And besides,

in the past year she had grown sensitive and timid; it seemed to her that she would be ashamed if she went off all alone with her lover among these crowds of people who were fleeing to find shelter for their little children. "What have we got to save?" she thought. But she was troubled about the little Heemskercks. She said to Luke, "You must go to them." It was a day when Luke had come in bringing bad news: the enemy had burned Louvain, Termonde, massacring by hundreds peasants and townsfolk on the thresholds of their houses. Aid from England had not yet arrived. The Belgian army, outflanked, had retired upon Antwerp and it was certain now that the country was abandoned, given over to the enemy—the Bavarians were coming. They were standing in their room; they looked at one another with white faces, and the specter of remorse rose up between them.

"You must go to them," repeated Gotton, and her contracted mouth could hardly pronounce the words. Luke bit his lips and pulled at his red beard.

"You don't know how proud the Moorsledes are," he replied. "Neither Gertrude nor her parents would so much as speak to me. They would throw me out like a dog—I couldn't even see the children."

"Go there, all the same. We must know if they're staying."

"I do know they are staying."

"Ah!" Another pain shot through the heart of the poor girl: he had inquired all by himself, without telling her.

"But they might perhaps be going to-day, how can you tell?"

"No."

"Luke, go to them!"

Luke had turned his back and entered the smithy. He had work to deliver the next day. Gotton listened to the blows falling on the anvil. She had a feeling of dizziness. With her hands hanging, incapable of doing anything, she looked about her at the room where they had loved each other and which was all decked with the presents Luke had been in the habit of picking up and bringing back to her from his journeys; the Adrinople curtains for the window, a brass lamp, some faïence plates painted with birds and leaves, pewter pots—then below, hanging behind a curtain, the dresses of all colors, the striped petticoats, the flowered fichus; at one side, the chest where the beautiful white linen was folded away and which contained also a little box full of gold trinkets. Gotton looked at all these things that Luke had given her during these three years. He had treated her like a mistress whom one flatters and spoils rather than like a true wife with whom one delights in sharing economies. Often she had been touched by this; to-day the thought added to her trouble and the horror she felt for herself. She gazed again at the mirror hanging on the wall, in the depths of which, when she was combing her hair in the evening under the lamp and the golden cascades streamed over her naked body, she had often seen appear the enchanted

face of Luke. She saw herself in the mirror, white to the lips. Everything that Luke had given her, all these things impregnated with memory and with love, suddenly seemed to her far away as if she was regarding them from the other side of death; her own face looked at her like a ghost. She felt herself immensely alone. Happiness had vanished like dew, and how faint it seemed to her now, how pale, how fugitive in the face of this terrible and persistent reality of sin, of this shame of a father who could no longer protect his own children! The blows of the hammer that resounded regularly in the forge crushed her heart. "He will not go!" she told herself. And all the living warmth of the kisses with which he had covered her so many nights was dissipated under the breath of the condemnation which she felt passing over her life. A voice cried from within: "For the idolatry of my body, he has left for three years the wife whom he took before God and the little ones who have need of him!" She felt bare and fainting under the lashes of remorse.

Close by, Luke kept striking the anvil, and the blows heavily shook the air where no other sound passed. In her dizziness, it seemed to Gotton that Luke's arm was riveting about her the chain of her sin.

Luke did not go to Iseghem that day, nor the next. Only on the third day, the day when all the bells of the canton were sounding the tocsin at once, urged on by his own uneasiness more than by Gotton's prayers,

did he set out on the road to go and find out what had happened to his children. He would offer to take back one or two with him, during the time of crisis, if that would ease matters. The essential thing was for them to be kept shut up. Frightful tales were circulating from village to village about little children whose hands the German soldiers had cut off.

When Luke returned to Meulebeke, alone, toward six o'clock in the evening, the village seemed deserted. The inhabitants had shut themselves in behind their closed doors; the animals had been driven into the stables or the back-yards. Over the silent houses vibrated, at slow intervals, the voice of the desolate bells. Gotton was standing quite alone, near the fountain, behind the church, pale as a phantom. When she saw Luke, she took several steps toward him, her mouth, half-open, her eyes bewildered.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded sharply.

She pointed to the belfry where the tocsin was incessantly sounding.

"You passed in sight of Metsys," she said slowly, and as if in a dream. "Is it sounding there too? Did you hear it?"

"Yes, there too."

"Ah!"

She saw her father again, in the bell-ringer's room, pulling the ropes.

"And at Iseghem? What have they done about the children? You haven't brought any of them back?"

They had arrived before the forge. Luke pushed her with a rough gesture into the interior. Then he adjusted the door, gave the lock a double turn and fixed the iron bar. Turning about, he at last said:

"It happened just as I said it would. They were all together in the kitchen, the Moorsledes and all their girls, with Gertrude, sitting doing nothing about the table. The children weren't there. I heard them making a noise in the garret. Old Moorslede spat on the ground when he saw me. I spoke up all the same. I said, 'Forgive me, even if I have wronged you; I've come to speak about the children.' They sent me off with insults. Gertrude cried out more loudly than the others, 'Look at him there, the scoundrel! Does he expect to carry them off to that hussy of his?' Come, don't cry, Gotton, you are my wife and my child. See, the bar is down. Have you bread enough for a few days? I can't let you set foot in the street any more. If we have to take men in, I'll hide you in the garret. You've seen the bar and the ring that I've forged to put up there. The Bavarians can't get them open. I'll guard you well, my lamb, my treasure; have no fear."

Gotton had no fear of the Bavarians and Luke sadly misread what her pallor and the obsessed fixity of her look expressed. Ever since the war had broken, opening its infinite perspectives of frightfulness, she had been possessed with a terror which was not that of murder or fire, of breadless days, shelterless nights, a devastated future. The tragic blow that

shook all souls had resounded for her like the trumpet of Judgment. It seemed to her that the end of the world had come, and in dismay she saw herself outside Christendom bound in the chains of a guilty love. She thought of the calamity suspended over every housetop like an avenging angel and trembled as she heard the inner voice that repeated: "In what state do ye find yourselves?" She felt herself overwhelmed again by those impressions of intense, solemn fear which her childhood had known and which youth and love had lulled with their perfumes of the flowering-season. Flowers of a carnal spring, they were all fallen now; the storm had just shaken off the last, laid bare the monstrosity of sin of which poor Gotton had to suffer the fixed and overwhelming vision. And still she asked herself how she could have protected herself from evil. When she revived in thought the weeks of infatuation, when she recalled Luke's words and his look and how she had felt herself gripped day by day, so strongly, so surely, it seemed to her that she had entered love in a manner as mysterious and inevitable as that in which one is born or dies. Because of just this and because she knew that she had not wished to do wrong, she believed herself doomed. "Oh! who will help me?" she sighed, and she had hoped passionately that Luke would bring her one of his children, or perhaps two . . . the smallest, if possible . . . but, no, it was not possible! Still, one never knew. . . . Children to protect, to care for, to whom she might give her own

bread, God! how she would love them! How she would sacrifice for them with all her heart, if necessary!

It had always seemed to her that the children one has under one's roof would protect one against damnation. But Luke had come back quite by himself, and here she would be alone with him, alone with this man for whom she had lost herself, to whom she felt she belonged with every fiber of her being, whom she would never have the strength to leave . . . alone, useless and safely sheltered, behind the bars which he had forged!

They were sitting together, silent, in the room. There was nothing more to do. The tocsin had stopped; a storm was brewing in the sky. At the last reports, the enemy was already in the canton.

Toward seven o'clock, they heard on the road the rapid trot of a detachment of cavalry. Luke climbed to the garret and placed his head at the little window: a troop of Uhlans was crossing the village in close formation and good order, shoulder to shoulder, flank to flank, the men silent and turning their heads neither to right nor left, the horses enormous and spirited, darting forward with fiery steps and yet held in line. It was as when, in the terrifying immobility of the plain before the storm, the first squall passes, brutally, with a long whistle and the flutter of the fallen leaves. The villagers who, like Luke, had placed their heads at their garret windows, turned

back with wavering knees: they felt breaking upon them the violence of the foreign enemy.

The heavy silence of expectation fell over Meulebeke.

A little later, a company of infantry halted in the square. They saw the captain, a big man with a beard, enter the burgomaster's house, then come out again ten minutes later to give his commands. The soldiers, under the direction of non-commissioned officers, scattered in little groups: two of them came knocking at the smithy. Luke, having bidden Gotton to hide herself in the garret, raised the iron bar that reinforced his door and opened to them. They were two young boys who looked like two brothers. They had a worn and timid look; they had just marched ten hours, they were covered with dust and smelled like animals. Their narrow skulls, their little eyes under their heavy swollen eyelids, their great lips, their big shoulders announced a race strangely primitive; they were like humble, savage serfs from the remote parts of barbarous provinces. Luke's masterful air filled them with as much fear as that of a commander. Luke pointed to the beaten earth, explained with a gesture that they were to sleep there, then went to find some bread, bacon, and beer for them. Every time he spoke to them, the two soldiers replied: "Danke schön!"

The night passed quietly in the humiliated village. The sound of the bugle very early in the morning brought the men together in the square for the roll-

call and drill. The people all day left them the run of the street and the wine-shop: not a soul set foot outside his house. Shut up together, Luke and Gotton were the most wretched of all, because of that irremediable separation their guilty life had established between them and all the families, all the good Christian folk, of this village. It was very hard to be alone and as it were exiles, even in this public ordeal in which they shared nevertheless! They did not refer to this misery between themselves, but both of them drew from it an even keener, more somber desire for love. They were anxious also. They were thinking that Iseghem was occupied like Meulebeke and, in spite of the strange calm of the long hours that slipped by, Gotton trembled for Luke's children. This calm was so unexpected after all the tales they had heard! It reassured nobody and simply gave them time to meditate upon the indeterminable menace that hung over the whole country.

Evening slipped into the room where the blacksmith and his mistress were dreaming in silence their dreams of fear. Suddenly several hasty blows resounded on the door of the smithy.

"Our Germans have come to look for their dinner," thought Luke, and rose to open. But Gotton heard him speaking in Flemish in the smithy; she realized that someone had brought him news. Her heart began to leap in her breast. A few minutes later Luke returned to the room, white, his brow beaded with sweat. He remained a moment motionless, his

eyes fixed on space, under the gaze of Gotton, who did not dare to question him. Then he said in a low voice: "Evil things have happened at Iseghem. Gertrude has been killed, with her sisters and her parents. And they say they're to burn the village. I am going to look for the children."

He went out at once.

Gotton, left alone, clasped her hands, and rocking her pale head repeated over and over: "The children will perish too; it is certain the children will perish too!" She felt that the hour of punishment had come, and it seemed to her all at once inevitable that it should be this very thing the terror of which had mysteriously haunted her for three weeks. It seemed to her that nothing could be worse. She could have endured it better if Luke himself had been murdered or taken as a soldier and killed in the war. She felt that when misery makes life intolerable one can always go and drown oneself in a canal or hang oneself at night in the room where one has been left alone, but how was it possible to believe that water and rope would deliver one from the remorse that gnaws from within?

Along the flat, dusty road Luke walked with great strides between the mowed fields. He kept his eyes fixed on the roofs of Iseghem, still a mile and a half away. The twilight was calm, cloudy, of a deep, dull blue. No sign of distress altered the habitual sweetness of evening, and the usual smoke of the chimneys was still mounting, in slender spirals, in the motion-

less air. Luke advanced with great speed, knowing that from one moment to another the flame of the conflagration might burst from their peaceful roofs. When he came within a few hundred yards of the village, he heard cries, a confused uproar, and he saw coming toward him, along the straight road, some women in flight. He passed through them, his eyes seeking his little ones among the children they were dragging along. They were moving on, an incoherent procession, calling out for their lost ones. Many had their clothes torn and bore the marks of blows and tears on their convulsed faces. Luke saw that his children were not among them. He did not stop to ask questions, but one of the women suddenly recognized him and, pointing her finger at him, screamed out:

“Ah! Look at him! So only the bad ones are going to escape!”

Luke entered the village. An odor of petrol infected the air. The street was full of soldiers. In the twilight was a clamorous crowd of men in gray uniforms: some, drunk with wine or bloodlust, marching about with rolling shoulders and singing, others, calm and busy, under the direction of non-commissioned officers, handling the pumps with the mechanical precision of the German infantryman on drill.

Luke ascended the street. There at the left was the house with its green blinds and the forge where he had lived ten years with his wife and from which he had set forth one spring morning never to return.

A little further on he arrived in front of Moorslede's house, to which Gertrude had returned with her five children after he had abandoned her.

The door was wide open. He entered. In the low entrance room where he had been abused the day before by the pride of a sturdy peasant family, he smelled the odor of blood. The shadow was already too black for him to distinguish anything, but he had hardly crossed the threshold when shrill cries rose from a corner of the chamber. The children were there, terrified in this darkness. He called their names: Jean-Baptiste! Catherine! Jean! Bernard! Louis! But they only began to cry more desperately. It was like the distracted tumult one hears at night in a nest of little birds mangled by an owl.

Feeling his way, he tried to go toward the corner where the little ones were cowering. His foot struck against an obstacle; he fell on his hands over a corpse. He raised himself, and his hands, to which clots of stickiness adhered, sought the face of the dead one. From the long beard whose whiteness he now distinguished in the darkness, he recognized his father-in-law, old Moorslede, a tall, heavy man who, at seventy years, had kept his rosy cheeks under his silvery hair; a man who had been kind to him once, during those years when he had called him his son. It seemed as if the taste of blood filled his mouth, and the cries of the children brought tears of anguish to his eyes. At last he perceived in one corner, to the left of the fire-place, the little convulsive group.

He approached, throwing himself on his knees, stretching his arms confusedly about them, like a bird spreading her wings over her brood, and he spoke to them so softly that he calmed them and felt their little bodies cease from trembling against his breast. "You must come with me," he said to them. "I am your Papa; no one will do you any harm." He rose up. His eldest son took him by the hand and dragged him toward the adjoining room. A remnant of daylight was entering there through a window whose dull greenish little panes faced the setting sun. He distinguished on the floor several stretched out forms, and more blood spread out in black blotches. He knew that he was going to see Gertrude: he wanted to turn away his head and flee. But the child did not loosen his hand and dominated him with his passionate will. He led him thus up to the window: there, raising a dim sheet, he revealed his mother's corpse stretched out, straight and rigid, the face raised, the eyes wide open, the stomach rent open by the strokes of a saber or a bayonet. A little white kerchief encircled the wrinkled neck and diffused in the shadow a livid phosphorescence over the uninjured face. The expression of this face remained absolutely unrelated to the hideous wound, from which the entrails were escaping: it was calm and hard, imprinted with a strange, an august dignity. Motionless, the father and the son regarded it. Suddenly a clamor arose in the street and they heard the sound of many people running rapidly. Luke realized that the burning had

begun. They must fly. He placed his hand on the child's shoulder. The latter stooped over the face of the dead woman and, before covering her, kissed her hollow cheek.

A minute later Luke, with the five children, the smallest of whom he carried in his arms, descended the village street. Already the smoke was stinging their throats, and behind them the flames were mounting. There were still a number of German soldiers going off in little groups, jostling each other, with great resounding laughs. A few of them pointed their fingers mockingly at the lame man who was fleeing, surrounded by children, but they did not do them any harm. One, standing all alone at the end of the village, wept as he saw them go by.

The reflection of the flames on the clouds covered the plain with an immense red canopy, lighting up here and there, on all the roads, the pitiful little black bands of people who had been driven from their homes, who were wandering among the fields which they had cultivated with their hands, over the earth where they no longer had any shelter. When the little ones were too weary, Luke sat down with them on the edge of the road; he supported their heads on his shoulders, on his knees; faint sobs shook them at intervals; if they saw a German soldier passing, they trembled and hid their faces.

When, in the middle of the night, Gotton opened the door on the side of the garden and saw Luke entering with the five children, tears of joy overflowed

her eyes. "Oh, Luke," she cried, "no harm has come to them?" "No," said Luke; "have you anything to eat?" As if to exorcise her misgivings, she had made ready just as if she believed that the children were coming; she had boiled the soup, and put clean sheets on the big bed where they were to sleep. With fresh towels she washed from their hands and faces the marks of blood, then unlaced the little shoes on their swollen feet. No longer frightened, they allowed themselves to be fed, undressed, embraced without resistance, and little by little the stupefaction of their wild young eyes gave place to that sort of weary torpor which one sees in children overwhelmed with fatigue. Gotton stretched them out, all five, side by side, on the bed. Luke and she lay down on the floor, but every quarter of an hour she got up to oversee the sleep of the children. The eldest was flushed and agitated; he seemed to have fever; the others were sleeping peacefully. Gotton marveled over the fair curls and the red curls mingled on the bolster, the cheeks which in sleep seemed to swell with a warmer blood, the soft lips which, at moments, stirred, yielding to some fleeting dream, the eyelids, so white, so delicate, the golden eyelashes. With what an ardent gaze she caressed the little heads! Here was the realization of what she had so long dreamed, the house full of children! In a few days they would laugh, these little ones, they would forget, at least the youngest would, the poor woman who had borne them and suckled them, and who was lying now, her

stomach gaping, in a room of her house. They would embrace Gotton, the adulteress, for whom their mother had been set at naught; she would comb their beautiful hair. No, Gotton felt clearly that this was impossible. Then what was going to happen? What would Luke wish to do? She did not doubt that now the children would take up all his heart. Her own desire to be a mother had made her understand what the love of parents for their little ones can be. It seemed to her inevitable that this love should end by being the stronger and by conquering in the father's heart the love of the wife. She recalled again that spring-time three years ago, and each of the steps that had led her toward her error. She told herself that she had entered upon this life like a poor simpleton who knows nothing and will not listen to those who do know. The mystery which the child learns through tenderness in the warmth of the maternal arms, her father had not revealed to her; she had discovered it too late, as a woman, through her own suffering.

Jean-Baptiste turned over on the bed murmuring: "Mamma! Mamma!" Gotton looked at him more closely. She saw on his face the stamp of Luke's tenacity. She felt that this one would not forget. He would hate her with all his strength. It was the same child who, last spring, had thrown a stone at her.

It was true that he was already eleven or twelve years old. If things did not settle themselves, they

could send him out as an apprentice, keeping the others at home. Gotton realized that after all Luke was free now; he could marry her to-morrow, she would be the legitimate wife, the second wife who has the right to bring up the children of the first, and the dead woman would be effaced, replaced, finally vanquished; she would not even have a grave where the children could go and pray, for, in the immense conflagration, which was reddening half the sky, her body would undoubtedly be no more than a little heap of blackened bones among the ruins. Of Gertrude Moorslede there would be no longer any question: and yet she might live in these little children's hearts to repulse the love of the barren girl.

"I must go away!" Gotton repeated to herself; and the tears streamed down her cheeks. In the three years since she had left Metsys, she had known nothing in the whole world but the silent, passionate figure of Luke. Her own land was for her a desert; there was not another soul with whom she could seek refuge. To go away—that meant to die in heart and in body.

Nevertheless, without knowing how it would be possible, she felt sure that she would go. Then she thought, "If I might be killed too? It ought not to be difficult!" She walked to the window, leaning her heavy brow against the glass, and as she watched the reflection of the fire trembling on the edge of the clouds, she plunged into the thought of the abyss.

Morning broke, sad and dreary like eyes that have

wept too much. A fine rain beat down to the horizon the smoke of the conflagration. After they had heard the German bugle sound the muster, Luke went out into the village while Gotton dressed the children. He came back in about half an hour and made a sign that he wished to speak to her aside. She followed him into a corner of the room, and he said:

"A German soldier has been killed in the commune. I have seen him. He's behind the hedge of old Van Dooren, who showed him to me; he must have been killed last night in a quarrel among the soldiers and dragged there afterwards; there's no blood and the wounds were made with a knife. The body is covered with leaves. No doubt whoever killed him meant to bury him there and then he was afraid and hid him quickly, as best he could. They were all drunk here last evening, and it seems that soldiers were heard coming from Iseghem, singing and shouting like lunatics after the fire and all the dirty things they'd done. The man who was killed must have been one of them, for they've already called the roll of those who are here and if one had been missing we should have heard the noise of it. But when they find this one, it's we who'll pay for it; there's a good chance that we'll be burned out as Iseghem was. We must try to get away in time."

"Luke," said she, "how can we do it? With the children and no cart! Look at Jean-Baptiste, all feverish; you could not make him walk half a league. And where should we go?"

He was silent, and then Gotton said brusquely:

"Go for me to the priest at Metsys. Tell him all that has happened and that we have the children with us, and ask him to lend us his chaise and his mare to save them. He will do it, he is very kind. Then you can drive us to Malines. And tell him that he must give me his blessing and pray for me."

"I can't leave you here alone. You must come with me and bring the children."

"No," she said. "In an hour and a half you'll be back. If any disaster happens in the village before then, we shall go and wait for you in the road."

She added, with a sudden pride:

"They'll never see me begging at Metsys!"

He did not insist, for she had a look that showed she would not yield; and he left in haste.

While he was speaking, in a flash Gotton had glimpsed her redemption. It seemed to her that some great mercy had come to give her a sign; she knew now what she would do. Scarcely had Luke left when she went to seek in an old drawer a little bottle of ink and a pen. She opened a box of letter-paper ornamented with flowers which he had naïvely brought to her one day, not thinking that she never wrote to anyone. With her untaught hand, in great awkward characters, she wrote:

"Luke, I must go away; I cannot bring up these little ones after all the harm I have done to their mother. I should love them; they would perhaps detest me: they would have reason to. I should die of shame and grief. As for you, you ought to live

for them now; you should marry; they must have a mother, and it should not be an unworthy one like me. I am thinking of that young girl at the Van Doorens'. I have heard people say that she is very good. She has never said unkind things to me. Perhaps she would be willing. Do this as soon as possible. Luke, I have been very happy with you, but it could not go on after what has happened. Do not have too many regrets. If you hear soon that I, too, have died, be happy for us both. It will be the sign that we are forgiven.

"Your poor sweetheart, who loves you and esteems you forever,

"GOTTON CONNIXLOO."

She folded the pretty flowered paper, placed her letter in an envelope, upon which she wrote, "Luke Heemskerck," and laid it on the mantelpiece. She embraced the children, bidding Catherine to keep a good watch over her little brothers and not allow them to go out into the garden, for the rain was falling now very heavily. Then, in her turn, she went out, wrapping the folds of her shawl around her breast. She walked quickly, passing in the street a number of soldiers who were smoking or whistling and a few stray, silent villagers, hugging the walls. More than one face was already white with fear and stamped with the anguish of death.

She crossed the village and followed the road to a little path which led to that farm of the Van Doorens near which Luke had said that a German corpse was hidden. The farmers, their children, their work-people were prudently keeping themselves shut up, and it was plain that the news of the murder had not spread among the Germans, for there was not a

living soul to be seen in this neighborhood. Gotton skirted the hedge that enclosed the kitchen-garden of the farm. Near the second turning, she perceived a heap of branches that seemed to have been torn from a wild quince-tree, the boughs of which, full of fruit, hung over the hedge just at this spot. Timidly she stooped over and lifted the wet rustling leaves, and suddenly she saw the cadaverous head with its viscous eyes filled with intolerable terror. She bent still further, observed still more closely the hideous gashes that yawned on both sides of the neck, then the details of the uniform, the number sewed on the shoulder-strap. When she had carefully examined everything, she let the leafy branches fall and went back in the heavy rain, by the still deserted path, then by the road to the village, where she stopped in front of the town hall.

In the town hall, the captain of the company quartered in Meulebeke was working with his two lieutenants. Some maps of western Flanders were spread out before them on a large table, on a corner of which were placed a large jug of beer and three glasses which they frequently filled and emptied.

An orderly appeared at the door.

"Captain, there's a woman here who insists on coming in."

"A woman who wants to come in? Go and see her, Hillmer," said the captain. "It may be some information."

Lieutenant Hillmer was an officer with a very military air. He had a great purple neck that projected in rolls over his coat collar, a square jaw, beautiful white teeth. With the swiftness and rigidity of an excellent mechanism, he rose and went out.

He came back at the end of a few minutes.

"It is a girl of the neighborhood, captain, who has the air of a madwoman. She has come to say that she killed a soldier last night."

The captain could not repress a start.

"What, here, in our cantonment, a shot has been fired?"

"No, he was killed with a knife—at least that's the story this woman tells. It couldn't be a man of the company. No one was missing at the roll-call this morning."

A silence followed. Lieutenant Hillmer looked his captain straight in the eyes, and a smile of expectation raised his leathery lip from his white teeth. The captain, a big man with a light beard, whose drawn eyelids blinked, passed and repassed his hand over his forehead.

"We must try her," he said, "and we'll see if we can't cut the affair short with an execution."

"Excuse me, captain," replied Hillmer; "you recall our orders: collective punishment every time we have had a man killed. The case of spontaneous confession was not foreseen."

"Ah, well! before a case that has not been foreseen I interpret the orders, devil take it! I interpret

them! Look here, Hillmer, do you imagine that I want to burn this hole? Do you imagine that would give me pleasure, what? Haven't you had enough of this beastly business? It's fifteen days since I've slept. My head's bursting! Do let us have peace and try to arrange it so that we can sleep quietly here this evening."

He folded his maps and straightened out the table a little, then, reseating himself, said in a calmer voice:

"Well, then, we shall constitute ourselves a tribunal. Hillmer to the right, Franz to the left. Hillmer, you have an interpreter?"

"Yes, captain! I have had the burgomaster come down."

"That's good. You may go now and find the adjutant, who will serve us as a clerk, and we'll question this woman."

The young man whom the captain had called Franz took his place, then stretched his legs under the table, throwing his shoulders against the back of the chair. He had the manner of a young man about town, slender, with white skin, flat cheeks, a careless, mocking smile. He remarked, in his cold and rather shrill voice:

"It's not the usual thing all the same, this affair, captain. I hope you're not going to hurry it too much?"

The captain seemed to have a sort of indulgence for this young man. He lightly shrugged his shoulders. "Listen to that!" he said. "There's a type of

intellectual for you! He turns war into a search for curiosities!" And he smiled at him with an affectionate air.

At the same moment Lieutenant Hillmer re-entered with the adjutant, to whom the captain handed a copy-book, a pen and a bottle of ink. All being in their places, the adjutant went to open the door and made a sign outside. Gotton appeared on the threshold between two soldiers with fixed bayonets. Behind her came the burgomaster, who was being held as a hostage in the town hall, a respectable man who had never spoken to Gotton in his life, and who, trembling all over with fear, fixed upon her an indignant stare. She was quite wet from the rain; her fair hair streamed over her pale cheeks which anguish, in these few days, had hollowed. She stood with her hands hanging; her glistening eyes scrutinized the three faces of the officers, moving from one to the other, trying to catch on these physiognomies the sense of the strange words. Her heart was beating so hard that she feared she was going to fall.

"You say you have killed a German soldier?" asked the captain, and the burgomaster translated.

Without lowering her eyes, Gotton signified, yes.

"Why?"

She made no reply.

"You mean," insinuated young Lieutenant Franz, "you don't feel like telling us that he was too amiable, the poor boy?"

The burgomaster did not translate. The captain inquired:

"Where is the body?"

"Behind the Van Doorens' farm," said Gotton. "I carried it there last night to hide it."

"You do not wish to say why you have committed this murder. But why have you come to denounce yourself?"

"So that you will do no harm to the village," she answered.

As they looked at one another, talking, she felt that what she had said had not had the air of truth, and these three men seemed to her so entirely without anger that she feared she was to be simply dismissed as a simpleton. She held herself motionless, watching their least gestures, her mouth slightly open, a strange green light quivering in her glittering eyeballs. All the energy of her profound nature concentrated itself in the desire to be believed and to obtain the grace of the expiation.

They had finished speaking. With a single movement all three straightened themselves, and a sort of impersonal majesty strangely informed their faces. The captain scanned a brief formula, then raised his head and brought his chin forward with a gesture of dismissal. Gotton realized that her desire had been granted. As she went out, Lieutenant Hillmer followed her and addressed himself to the orderly on duty at the door of the room.

"Find me at once six men of the company," he said to him. "It's for an execution squad."

In the chamber where they were spreading out the maps again, the pale little lieutenant, with his careless smile, said to the captain:

"You understood, didn't you, that her story was not true?"

The captain made a gesture that signified, What does it matter? and added:

"If it wasn't she, it was her lover. I repeat to you that I have no desire to burn this village. When the affair gets abroad, it will be a good thing to be able to show that justice has been done."

* * * * *

The following morning, Luke Heemskerck knocked at the door of the chorister Connixloo. He found him alone, seated, his head between his hands, in the dark room where for three years no one had swept away the cobwebs. Connixloo, rising, drew back a step as he saw the blacksmith enter.

"Your daughter is dead, Mr. Connixloo," said Heemskerck.

"She has been dead, yes, for three years, for me."

"She died of her own will, Mr. Connixloo, and to save Meulebeke. It is necessary for you to know this."

Without responding, Connixloo, as if listening, raised his head with its knotted temples, pallid like an old parchment, and his teeth chattered.

The blacksmith told him of the burning of Iseghem, how he had carried his children to Meulebeke, how

Gotton had nursed them and put them to bed, then of the uneasiness he had felt the day before for Meulebeke after the discovery of the corpse hidden behind the Van Doorens' hedge, his desire to leave, the ruse which Gotton had planned in order to get him out of the way.

"When I reached Metsys," he said, "and asked for his reverence, his reverence was very kind; he came down to speak to me himself and asked me news of Gotton. He told me, as I might have expected, that he had lent his chaise and his mare eight days before to a widow of the parish who had set out for Antwerp with her children. 'Everybody knows,' he said, 'that the priest doesn't leave, and also that his chaise is the first one to be lent. I should have been glad,' he said, 'to do something for Gotton.'

"Then I ran the whole length of the road back to Meulebeke. As I descended the road before entering my house, I looked about to see if anything had changed.

"I noticed that people made way for me as I passed and that, nevertheless, they looked at me. I asked a neighbor in the square, 'Anything new?' He pointed to the houses which were quite peaceful, and said to me, 'You can see for yourself.' Then I entered the smithy and found a letter that Gotton had written to me: she said that she was going away, that she could not bring up my children, and she allowed me to see clearly that the thought of seeking death was in her mind. I ran out, I saw a crowd in front of the town

hall; one of the men who was there came toward me and embraced me weeping, saying: 'She has saved the village!' Then I understood everything, Mr. Connixloo: that she had been to tell the officers in the town hall, that she had said she had killed the soldier, and that she was dead.

"There were a great many people around me, some of whom embraced me, while others said: 'It's an outrage!'—for they thought it was I who had committed the murder. As for me, my head was turning. . . . I cried, 'Where is she?' and at the same time I couldn't take another step. They led me to the place where the soldiers had shot her, behind the town hall, against the wall of the garden. She was there, lying on the ground, with a face as sweet as a child's. And her clothes, her black shawl, were all covered with blood, and the wall was bespattered too. Beside her was a soldier, with bayonet fixed. I cried out: 'It's my wife, I want to carry her away!' But the soldier pushed me off with his bayonet. I understood that the officers had given an order that everybody should see her and take fear from it. I wanted to speak to the officers, but they would not let me enter the hall. Then I remained near her on my knees till nightfall. The rain fell on her and drenched her cheeks; I saw her blood flowing in the little streams of water. Toward seven o'clock, a soldier came to speak with the sentinel; then they made a sign to me that I could take her away, that they would leave her for me to bury her. I carried her to the forge and

I have not buried her, Mr. Connixloo, because I believe that it would have been her wish to be placed in the cemetery of Metsys by the side of her mother, if you wish it, Mr. Connixloo. . . .”

The chorister seemed overwhelmed. He murmured: “My poor little girl! My poor little girl! And she was not even confessed!” Heemskerck did not reply, and for a moment nothing was heard in the low room but the stifled sound of sobs.

“I will go with you,” said Connixloo. “We shall have only our arms, I think, to carry her here.”

They set out together, the old chorister and the blacksmith, the weight of sorrow bending their shoulders, as they walked through the fields thickly strewn with white flowery clusters out of which rose, for them, the image of Gotton.

They passed on their left the ruins of Iseghem, a skeleton village, shattered, blackened, still smoking. The road was deserted and crossed with great puddles.

“I have grievously offended you, Mr. Connixloo,” said Heemskerck; “but you see, your daughter, I would have given my life ten times for her. I loved her so that I would not have believed it possible to lose her. But God is the master. . . .”

“If I am asking you what I am asking you, Mr. Connixloo,” he went on, after a heavy silence, “it is because of a sentence which she wrote to me before she went to find the officers in the town hall: ‘If you hear soon that I, too, have died, be happy for us both; it will be the sign that we are forgiven.’”

I am afraid that she suffered great torment from thoughts which I did not know of. She went to her death with the hope of being pardoned by God: I believe that she would have dearly wished to know that her father would pardon her also, and her village."

Connixloo lifted an arm above his head, with a strange gesture as if to defend himself before the divine majesty, and he murmured:

"God is the judge; as for me, I pardon my child."

They arrived at the forge. Connixloo drew back at the threshold as he saw the white, veiled form stretched out in the shadow, on the floor of beaten earth.

Then, approaching, he lifted the shroud himself. Luke had washed the wounds of the dead; he had removed her clothes, soiled with blood and mire, and had dressed her in a long chemise; he had joined her hands together and parted the hair, which descended like two rivulets of gold all the way to her knees. And now he no longer dared to kiss her; she had become so distant, so pure, so tranquil! She no longer had need of him, or of anything. She had reached the end of love, as she had reached the end of expiation; she seemed plunged in an immovable satisfaction, and perhaps that strong, blissful ardor of which she had dreamed as a little girl, in front of the church windows of Metsys, before the age of earthly passion, had become her destiny.

The children were gathered in an adjoining room.

Catherine had just lighted the fire and prudently, as she had seen her mother do, she was paring some potatoes and carrots which she had taken from among the provisions heaped up in the garret. She had washed her little brothers, who were neat and fresh and were laughing as they played. Luke, who had half opened the door, gazed at them. She, who had been all the beauty, all the sweetness, all the intoxication of life, was lying there in eternal silence, and yet the house had never been so full of youthful strength and youthful hope. These children, who had seen their mother murdered scarcely two days before, were accustoming themselves to a new home with all the humble and vigorous docility of their age. Luke thought, as he looked at them, that now his house belonged to them, his life also, everything that was his, and that Gotton had wished it so. He closed the door again and turned toward Connixloo.

On a litter of nailed branches, they carried Gotton's body together as far as Metsys. There they laid it in the hallowed earth, among the irises, by the side of Jeanne Maers, the beautiful beloved, whom she had been so like. And Connixloo went to find the priest, so that he might come and bless the grave. The priest, who was being kept as a hostage in the town hall, came between two soldiers to recite the prayers for the dead.

When he had finished, Connixloo, straightening his stiff shoulders, accompanied him to the gate of the cemetery. Then the old priest tenderly laid his arm

over his shoulders, and said to him: "Do not grieve too much, my good Connixloo. The Lord is merciful. You see, your poor Gotton, her head was not very clear, that was why she let herself be led into error. But she was a girl with a deep heart."

FORGOTTEN

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MME. ESTIER was returning to the hospital across the Luxembourg. It was rare that she was free early enough to taste this pleasure, and it was usual for her to reach the rue du Fleurus in pitch darkness, skirting the rails of the closed garden. It was a rosy, icy evening of the first week of February; the jet of water springing up from a column of ice spread through the enchanted silence its crystal tinkle. A pale blue moon was mounting, faintly phosphorescent, above the terrace, crowned with a semi-circle of chestnut trees. Mme. Estier, enveloped to her chin in her fur jacket, was walking with a light step. After her day of jarring, harassing work, she was advancing with pink cheeks, her mouth slightly open and wreathed with vapor, in the cold air which turned other faces, less young than hers, quite blue and made less active bodies huddle into themselves. She was reveling physically in this hard, pure air and in her own vigor which her swift and rhythmical walk was renewing after the fatigue of the day; but she was not paying any attention to it. The hospital still peopled her mind. Poor 36, whom she had nursed for three months, was going to have an amputation the next day: there was nothing else to be done about

that leg. It was not easy for her to endure the thought of the void there would be, to-morrow, in the place of the suffering member and that long wound of which she knew all the hollows, all the colors with a knowledge that was intense and minute, that wound which she had so often bathed, then vaporized, sometimes three-quarters of an hour at a stretch without taking her eyes from it, then cleansed atom by atom, searched with long pliers swathed in gauze, a light, sensitive, but still cruel tampon that made them both, patient and attendant, turn pale at moments—that deep wound between its mottled edges which had been so long in the foreground of her daily life, which she had uncovered each morning with such anxiety and devotion, that she had ended by loving it. Well, they were going to cut all that away and carry it off with the knee, the white, moist leg with its sharp-edged tibia, the emaciated foot with its covering of rind under the sole and heel. . . . Mme. Estier walked with a still quicker, more impetuous step. “It’s unbelievable,” she said to herself, “that I have never been able to get used to these amputations.”

At the same time the prolonged echo of a groan trailed through her head. Ah! 28! that poor fellow who had had his face and hands burned by the bursting of an incendiary shell! That red face, scaly, swollen, that hair with its burnt smell, those great lips, tough and leather-colored, the forehead and the eyes under bandages. How he had groaned all day,

that man! The sting of the flames tormented him perpetually. Every ten minutes his mouth had to be dampened with fresh water. During the four days that he had been there as if in a long nightmare, without having seen anything that surrounded him, he had uttered nothing but lamentations: "Ah! Good God! How it hurts me! Good God in heaven! Water, Madame . . . more!"

These heavy wailings of a virile voice haunt one's ears.

And then that morning there had been the departure of 32, that frail little invalid, so gentle, so tranquil, whom his comrades thought a simpleton. He had had an arm and a leg amputated, that one! Mme. Estier had dressed him for his departure (they were sending him to Lyons, where he was to receive his apparatus); she had drawn on his one sock, laced his boot, adjusted the straps over his now uneven shoulders; she had buttoned the cloak, so heavy and stiff and almost clinging, over this fragile, twice-mutilated body. From the cloak hung the war-cross and the military medal. She had tried several times to find out what little Brasleret had done to be decorated, but he had only replied with an air of embarrassment: "Oh! The bullets were whistling, and the shells were falling!"

Once dressed, he had hopped about awkwardly but briskly like a little wounded bird, going the round of the beds. "Good-bye, old fellow, bon voyage!" They were very indifferent, his comrades. Then Mme.

Estier had descended the staircase with him, carrying his crutch, while, supporting himself on the banisters, he jumped from step to step. It was tiring. On reaching the bottom he was covered with perspiration. Twice he had to stop to recover his breath in the corridor that led to the office for those who were leaving. There, two comrades were waiting to be taken to the same train. The adjutant asked, in a business-like tone: "You have received your money?" "Yes," replied Brasleret, with an expression of contentment, like a man who is testifying that everything has been well-managed for his comfort and that he has nothing to complain of. "One franc, twenty-five. Good-bye, Madame Estier, and many thanks."

Mme. Estier had said to herself as she went up again: "I feel as if things were going all wrong to-day." She wanted nothing but to sit down in a little corner of the cloak-room and weep. But why? Brasleret was like that. For a long time they had known what Brasleret was like!

The Luxembourg was so beautiful that when she reached the edge of the terrace, instead of descending the steps, Mme. Estier leaned against the stone balustrade behind which the romantic queens of France stand in a line. She let her glance rest on the great deserted circle stretched at their feet between the two terraces. The ground had that almost invisible hue, that pale gray, of very cold days. The chestnut trees facing her interlaced their brown branches against the lilac-colored sky. At the right, the old plane-

trees rose in their dishevelment still higher in the infinite of ashy blue. It was that mysterious evening which comes back, faithfully and stealthily, once each year in the decline of winter, that buoyant evening, that transparent evening, which one recognizes suddenly like a perfume and which makes one say with a delicious astonishment: "Ah! how long the days are growing!" The new hour conquered from the winter night seemed sweet to the young woman whose heart had lived so long in waiting and hope. She evoked her husband—the hospital fell away into an indifferent remoteness. The absent one was there; she was resting on his shoulder. . . . She tasted a moment of illusion, as fresh and surprising as the odor of water to a thirsty man who leans over a well. She pressed her teeth together and repeated to herself the daily article of faith which this first gray glimmer of spring made all the more intense: "He will come back to me."

A woman in mourning, leading a little boy by the hand, appeared at the side of the great plane-trees. The solitude was so complete that Mme. Estier at once observed the little group. The two silhouettes, clearly detached against the dim ground, produced in her an impression of melancholy. What a sad, pitiful air everyone had in this cold! She vaguely followed them with her eyes to the brink of the pond, where they stopped before the flexible aigrette of crystal. Then, without knowing why, Mme. Estier began to think of Vouziers, where she had gone to

school at a charming convent, and of her school friend, Denise Huleau, "little Nise," as they called her, who had become engaged just after her, six months before the war, and had been unable to marry before the war had imprisoned her at Vouziers. "Poor little Nise, so odd, so pretty, what has become of her?" With this reflection Mme. Estier felt the numbness biting her feet, and quickly resumed her walk. She passed close to the pond, frozen save for a black circle in the middle where the shower of the water-jet was falling. She walked by the woman in mourning, who was holding in her astrakhan muff the hand of the little boy. Then she heard a frail, almost crystalline, voice which was saying: "When the pond is melted, Leonard, I shall give you a little boat."

Mme. Estier turned: that charming voice had for her such a familiar sound! She took several steps behind the strolling woman, then, turning aside a little, she tried to distinguish a profile under the brim of the black hat, and suddenly she advanced, murmuring:

"Denise! Is it possible?"

"Oh! Adrienne!" cried the frail voice.

And two chilly young faces pressed each other fervently.

"How long have you been back?"

"I was repatriated in December."

"And you never told me?"

"Not yet. Don't be angry with me."

And the big shy eyes drooped.

Adrienne Estier said, quite low, touching the veil of crêpe:

"I hardly dare ask you?"

Denise said:

"My brother Max a year ago, Mamma in the autumn."

Silently they embraced each other again.

Then Mme. Estier asked:

"Come back with me; it's quite near. Where are you living?"

"At the Hotel Corneille."

"At a hotel? But, Denise, you have forgotten me!"

"No, no," said Denise, with a nervous flutter of the eyelids. "But you don't know. . . . I have been going through very hard things. Please, no more this evening; to-morrow, if you wish. . . ."

Adrienne Estier sought her friend's eyes, those great eyes whose clearness she had loved since childhood.

"Still Mlle. Huleau?" she asked, in a tender voice.

"Yes."

There was a second of silence. Mme. Estier looked at the little boy who had left his hand in Mlle. Huleau's muff. But she did not ask anything more.

"I am at the hospital all day," she replied. "At the best I get back at six o'clock. You must stay to dinner with me. . . ."

The young girl nodded her head. Mme. Estier

took her in her arms and felt her slight shoulders tremble. "To-morrow," said Denise Huleau again, with a smile full of a humble, wounded grace. "How good you are! How happy I am going to be now that you have found me!" Then she turned toward the silent little boy, smiled at him also and led him after her, withdrawing rapidly in the direction of the Medici Fountain.

The meeting had been so brief, in the shadow of the evening, that Mme. Estier almost asked herself if she had not been dreaming.

That night, in her pretty room, the room of a young bride, where her baby's cradle was placed close to her own bed, she slept badly. The pale face of little Nise appeared before her, hovering, colorless, among the dead leaves. It was in a wood where a man who had undergone an amputation was running on crutches, wildly seeking his leg. She awoke, her head full of confusion, her heart knotted—and she thought: "Poor little Nise, poor darling! Is she truly alone in life now? She did not mention him . . . something must have happened to him. . . . And who is that little boy?" She had hardly dozed off again when new dreams peopled her sleep with doleful whisperings: there was Mme. Huleau, as white as wax, who was murmuring as they placed her in her coffin: "Take good care of Nise"; and Denise replied, in an impatient voice: "Don't say that, Mamma; there is no one left to take care of me. Ah, yes! the two

birches in the garden. Forgive me, Mamma!" and the voice died away in a long sigh.

Toward two o'clock Adrienne Estier rose, lighted her lamp and went to open a little secretary where were arranged a few souvenirs of her life as a young girl. She took out an envelope full of photographs and a packet of letters which she opened as soon as she had got back to bed. They were the letters Denise Huleau had written to her friend between her eighteenth and twenty-third years during their separations in summer and spring. The young woman began to reread them: they were graceful letters, of a tender, unassuming tone, through which passed now and again a sort of shiver of melancholy. Like the letters of an old lady, they opened almost always with, "My pretty one. . . ."

Adrienne Estier smiled as she saw this appellation again. At the convent they had once said, "as pretty as Adrienne!" She raised her eyes toward the mirror that hung facing her bed and looked at her long, bright face with its delicate features. For an instant she thought of her husband. "I have never shown him my old treasures," she said to herself. "I wonder if he would understand?" Then she became absorbed for a long time in her photographs. They were at first groups of school-girls under the lilacs of their convent. Denise Huleau was there, always in the first row because she was the smallest, sitting at the foot of a bench with the air of a little sprite, her light, silky hair ruffled about her forehead, and such big,

clear, sensitive eyes. . . . A strange little girl, changeable and full of mystery! She was not pretty, she was too pale, with her rather round nose—an oval commonplacely designed—but when she was moved and a little light flush quivered in her cheeks, she became ravishing. She appealed to everyone through her animation. There were days when people said: "Look, Nise's eyes are like fireworks!" And the next day they would say sometimes; "Look, Nise is under the ashes!"

These latter days, the days of ashes, she was nothing but a poor little vague thing, forlorn, overwhelmed by the too difficult lessons, the exacting demands of the regulations, the teasings of her companions. Adrienne recalled Nise, her head and shoulders sunk under the lid of her desk, abandoned to despair. She recalled also, how, before this spasmodically shaken lid, she had shrugged her shoulders one day, and the sudden shame the deep, compassionate eyes of a young teacher had caused her. She felt again in her cheeks the hot flush of that moment, and in her heart, with the unexpected confusion of her childish pride in her own good behavior, the obscure, poignant perception of a mystery of sadness that enveloped her little friend. When she returned home she had asked her parents: "Nise Huleau has lost her father, hasn't she? Wasn't it a long time ago?" Later they had told her of the long agony of Denys Huleau, paralyzed in the midst of his youth by a lesion of the marrow of which he was three years

dying. When Denise had come into the world, the younger sister of two boys, the malady had already appeared. The child was born with signs of a sickly constitution, a sort of tired eagerness. She did not resemble her mother in any respect, and judging from the portraits which Adrienne had always seen in the Huleaus' house, she did not resemble her father either, though she had inherited from him her rounded forehead and her light, fair hair. In her days of reverie, Adrienne had sometimes thought: "She is like her father's illness. She suggests what this young, condemned being, this infirm lover, must have felt and suffered, this soul which, in the prison of a paralyzed body, had gone mad at moments with the desire to live." Everyone knew that the Huleau household had been passionately united. Mme. Huleau who, after her widowhood, had never given up her mourning, watched with a somewhat distant and almost severe eye the growth of this third child. It was as if she did not altogether believe that this odd, sensitive creature was really her own child, the last fruit of her youth and her broken love. As a widow, she had tried to make life supportable by giving herself over to devotion and good works: her character had grown precise, simplified under the action of a rigid discipline. She was a woman with the will of a Cornelia. Any pleasure she experienced came to her through her sons, who resembled her, and whose exceptional brilliance in their studies gave to her that element of pride which a woman of her type inevitably regards

as her due. But Denise, too small, too nervous, with her outbursts of eager desire and her fits of despair, troubled her without really touching her heart.

As she examined these photographs of the convent, Mme. Estier in her mind's eye formed anew the image of her little comrade, in the years that followed the First Communion. How touching and charming she was, that pathetic child whose eyes had such sudden ardors! Over her almost transparent temples a blue line wandered. Her hair, braided during the week over a black smock, was spread out on Sundays between her two shoulders, a silken flood, of a fair tint into which one would have said a little silver had slipped, and which shone with a warm radiance. This flood, over her school-girl's dress, was like the visible outpouring of a secret quality of her being, the exhalation of her profound sweetness. She had little feverish hands, dirty, always warm, scratched by the cats. The sensible Adrienne felt such an attraction for these little hands that often, during the study hour, she would seek them under the adjoining desk and abandon her own to them. . . .

At sixteen, Denise had been attacked by typhoid fever and had remained a month in danger. At the convent, they had prayed a great deal for her. Now that she was no longer there, everyone felt the need they all had of her presence, her humble, eager charm, her gentle sweetness, her great eyes in which the ordinary happenings of the day took on a quite unforeseen color. When Denise no longer came, the lessons in

literature were no less interesting, nor the game of bases less lively, nor the song of benediction in the chapel less devout. But in the midst of oneself one felt the lack of something indefinable, as if the whole well-tuned series of the hours were unrolling itself over a depth of ennui. Adrienne recalled how the second class devoted its recreation hours to reciting the rosary, under the acacias in the garden, for little Nise's recovery. For a long time, the idea of typhoid fever had remained associated in her mind with the odor of the ripe grapes which swayed in the June breeze above the procession.

At the reopening in October, Nise had come back changed, grown tall all at once, with short hair in a silky mist on her head. She had a lost look, as if her childish soul could not accommodate itself to this transformed, elongated, languid body. She abandoned herself to outbursts of tears, in the midst of class, with none of the instinct that grown people have to conceal their troubles. At this time a passionate attachment she formed for the mistress of studies consumed the forces of her disordered being. When the young Mother Perpetua, straight as a candle, her head high and smiling, her step invariably calm, came to take supervision over the study or the recreation hour, one saw Denise Huleau flush and grow troubled. Some of her companions, observing her at these moments, had felt their half-mocking curiosity transform itself into a strange emotion: the poor, ravished face of little Nise exercised a sort of magnetism.

Adrienne lingered in the cold, silent night over this evocation of memories, the warm memories of her early youth, her unfolding time. Beyond the monotonous horror of the hospital and the tales of war, beyond the brutalities, the agonies, the disasters of each day and all that appalling terror, what a tender light shone over the convent of Vouziers! Sleepless, sad, she bent over another little image, no longer a class group, but an amateur photograph taken one summer afternoon by a pupil who had brought her kodak for the recreation hour: it was Nise, standing in her school-girl's uniform, her shoulders narrow and stooping under the flat cape, her head slightly inclined to one side, her mouth with its corners tenderly curved in, the little swelling forehead, the eyes like two transparent springs. "Poor little darling!" thought Adrienne. "What has the war done to you?" And she felt the weight of the two and a half years of silence and sorrow which had just passed over her native town, over all the little world of her childhood and her youth, over her friend. In contrast with the silhouette, enigmatical and dressed in mourning, which she had embraced in the twilight, near the pond, the caprice of memory showed her Nise on the night of a ball at one of her aunts'. That little Nise, pathetic and awkward as she had remained among her companions, who had grown into slim, vigorous young women, had danced with delight—and like a sylph. The evening of this ball she had appeared wearing a gown of bright poppy-red—rather bold for

Vouziers, but that severe Mme. Huleau knew what was pretty!—from which her paleness took fire like a white flower in the glow of noon. She had danced indefatigably, as if intoxicated, without self-consciousness, without coquetry, luminous as the down that floats and turns in the air. The groups of people, inevitably massed about the doors, watched her. They said: “She’s astonishing! a Cinderella!” But what still ravished Adrienne’s memory was the radiant look which her little friend had thrown her more than once over the shoulder of her partner when they passed one another in the eddies of the waltz. What an infinity of trust, what a power of loving there was in that look! No other young girl had that light of love, no other was so unreserved—at once simple and odd, like children immensely unconscious by nature, like a flower that unfolds fearlessly in the sun a corolla inscribed with a strange design. The obscurities, the melancholy, the violence of the age of tempest had passed. One is happier and calmer at twenty years than at sixteen. But at the new age, the unaltered traits of her childhood appeared more purely. One felt in all her being an inalterable sincerity, a naïveté that life would not change, something humble, impervious to all pretension and even to all elegance, something aerial and wild, something passionate. Beside her, the girls who were prettier and shapelier seemed vulgar; their hidden pettinesses became visible.

Adrienne had reached the end of the little packet

of photographs; she held the last one in her hand. She had taken it herself, she well remembered, in Mme. Huleau's garden, during one short visit which she had made at Vouziers on the return from her wedding-journey. The little paper was still quite fresh. . . . Yet, that spring of 1914, how far away it seemed! Denise was twenty-four years old; she had been engaged for three months, she was going to be married in the autumn, as soon as her fiancé, who was instructor of philosophy at a lycée in Paris, and who was preparing for his doctorate, had finished writing his lesser thesis. He had come to pass the Whitsuntide vacation near her. Adrienne had been invited to meet him. They had had tea in the garden amid the perfume of the syringas. "Do you know, he is exquisite!" she had said to Denise, at the turning of one of the paths. He was a tall, slender young man, who had a beautiful high forehead, a rather proud face, gray eyes slightly uneven in their deep sockets, a mustache and a little golden brown beard through which one saw the lower lip, delicate and brightly colored. His hands were long and knotty. He spoke in a rhythmical voice, slightly harsh, which sometimes became very tender. "Denise," he said, smiling with the air of a man lost in an opium-dream, "promise me that we shall never pass Whitsuntide anywhere else than at Vouziers!"

He was a friend of Max Huleau's, then a third-year student at the École Normale. His name was Philip Brunel. Denise had met him during a stay in

Paris where her mother sometimes took her to see her brother. During the next visit the two young people had become engaged. There they were, together on that little sheet, still fresh and shining, a slender pair in the dampness of a June day. They had an unreal look—one could not have said why—she, with her First Communion face; he, oh! he, bizarre, charming enough, with an expression at once voluptuous and absent-minded, as if he were enjoying not only the present hour but some far-off transposition of that hour in music or in philosophy. . . . The image evoked for Adrienne the fresh, strong perfumes of the Whitsuntide and the nightingales in Mme. Huleau's garden.

She put the letters and the photographs back in their envelopes, and laid them on her little table; she looked at her baby who, under his canopy of blue muslin, his lips half open, seemed to be drawing in sleep like milk. For a second she thought of the mystery of growth, of the inexorable entanglement of forces which, from within and from without, impels each being to its destiny. . . . She sighed, put out her lamp, tried to sleep. But she had opened too wide the floodgate of memory and till morning the ebullition of the past continued to whirl across her sleeplessness.

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The following day, returning hastily at six o'clock, oppressed with sadness, after having passed the day by the bedside of the one whose leg had been ampu-

tated, she found Denise awaiting her, seated at a corner of the fireplace in the drawing-room—slight, quiet, provincial, her hands joined in the hollow of her knees.

She had a sober air, a tranquil bearing; she had become one of those slight, circumspect young women, like many another.

“Denise, my darling! At last! At last! You are near me! Let me take off your hat, your gloves; let’s be as we used to be together! You are cold, aren’t you? This cold is frightful!” . . . She knelt to place two logs on the fire. Then she took from the hands of the young girl the black hat and the crêpe veil. “Oh! this black!” she said. “Oh! Denise, how sorry I am to meet you again this way!” She ran to put the hat away and take off her own in the vestibule. “Oh! you, you!” she murmured, as she clasped her friend. It seemed as if she was embracing her own youth and the bruised image of the tendernesses and the sweetness of other days. “How thin you are! And you haven’t told me anything! You break my heart. . . . Heavens, how you have suffered! . . .”

The tears rolled down the cheeks of Adrienne Estier as she held between her hands the emaciated face, with its pale, chapped lips, in which the eyes shone with an unearthly light, like two solitary stars in a cold sky.

“And you?” asked Denise. “One fears to tell one’s own story and one fears to ask questions, isn’t it so?”

“I?” replied Adrienne, “I’m one of the privileged ones. I still have my husband, I have a child. And

yet I live in such anguish that, at moments, it seems to me I would rather be dead."

"Oh!" said Denise, "You have a child!"

"Yes, let me show him to you, may I? I should love to see him in your arms."

She disappeared and came back at once, bearing in her arms a plump baby which she placed on the knees of Denise. She herself crouched at one side, placing her cheek against that of the child.

"How pretty he is!" said Denise. "How old is he?"

"Almost a year. My husband was wounded in Artois in the spring of 1915. I had him with me during one month of convalescence—he left me this little monster to keep me company, so that I shouldn't wither away in grief and impatience. Isn't it so, Raymond? Isn't it so, my poor darling?"

She closed her eyes as she spoke and rounded her pretty little mouth. The child looked Denise up and down with an intense, black stare.

"Oh!" said she. "How he looks at me, how serious he is!" And she hugged him impulsively, with an almost savage movement.

"Does he look like his father?" she asked.

"Yes, very much."

"I frighten him, he's going to cry," said Denise, brusquely. "Come, take him back."

Adrienne took him in her arms and went out, rocking him.

"There," she said, as she came back. "I've given

him to the nurse. I want to have you all to myself. Denise, how are things at home?"

"At home? It's like being in a prison, and for many of the poor people it's like the hulks. Those who are forced to work for the enemy! I think you know in Paris that there have been martyrs down there? Boys whom they fasten to posts, outside the town, quite naked, day after day, because they refuse to work. They are fastened with barbed wire—they bleed in the cold, in winter, and in summer in the blazing sun, stung by the gadflies. One day they brought one back to us in Vouziers delirious, who had had a sunstroke. There are some who give in; I have seen them going by in a file, their heads lowered, pickaxes on their shoulders. We knew they were taking them to the trenches. You remember that little Julian whom we liked so much, our gardener's son? He went. . . ."

"My God, Denise! but it's horrible!"

"Oh, yes! Oh! It's an abomination every day. Those people would trample on Christ crucified. They destroy everything that we love. Our forests, think of it, the forests of our country, are all cut down; we have seen them going by on drays under our windows. They, too, they are going to the trenches! To cut them down they make use of the Belgian and Russian prisoners, whom they allowed to perish of hunger. Everything is a machine with them. They themselves act like parts of an enormous machine. The most astonishing thing is that, taken by them-

selves, the soldiers are often not bad. But they are parts of the machine, and that makes everything possible. Imagine it, our old forests shorn by these troops of starving men! Our people gladly share their bread with those poor fellows. It's a horror, you know, to see people suffering from hunger; they take on frightful expressions that leave you unable to rest—especially those Russians whom we don't understand and who have nothing but their look! The Germans forbid anyone to give them anything whatever: for a morsel of bread offered to a prisoner one pays a fine—big enough for one to be unable to try it often! And then there have been those deportations of young girls for work in the fields. The newspapers here have spoken of them, haven't they? They came to our house to see if we had anyone they could take. They left me because of Mamma, who was so ill. However, I believe in any case they wouldn't have found me robust enough—but plenty of others have gone! That was last summer; since then, their families have received news from them two or three times, no more, and no one know how they are treated, the poor creatures, nor when they will come back."

"And the town?" asked Adrienne. "Has anything been destroyed there?"

"No, but little by little the houses end by being empty. The soldiers never steal anything, except vegetables when they have had a poor dinner and when they find a way to climb over the wall of a

kitchen garden. But the Kommandatur constantly sends a squad to you, commanded by an officer, to carry off, one day some chairs, one day some sheets, one day your piano, one day your kitchen utensils. . . . Ah! what pedants they are! . . . How sordid they are! . . . The day when I saw a Boche opening my bed to count my bed-clothes, I felt as if I could tear his eyes out. He was going to do the same thing with the bed of poor Mamma, who was so ill! But *that* I put a stop to."

A heavy silence fell between them. The weight of the oppression had humbled their hearts.

Adrienne murmured, "Dear, tell me about yourself!"

Denise was bent forward in her low chair, her chin propped on her two clenched hands, her pale face turned toward the fire.

"Ah! she replied. "Forgive me! One grows so accustomed to suffering alone. And so many things have happened to me! I no longer know myself. Mamma fell ill in the summer of 1915. Till then, during the first year, she had been occupied with nothing but charity. There was a great deal to do: since the first winter our poor had been without clothes; and then there were sick people to care for: they could hardly ever be taken to the hospital, which was always full of Germans. As for me, I went about everywhere with Mamma. I could not stay alone any longer, I don't know how I would have passed two hours without her. I had lost my sleep:

without news of Philip, without news of my brothers, I was desperate. And Mamma was so good for me, she kept me up, I never left her. And you know how absent-minded and awkward I am and how much patience one has to have to do things with me!

“Although Mamma never complained, I saw that she was looking badly. I thought that she was doing too much, that she needed rest. But she had made herself necessary to a great many people, and both of us, when we had passed a day without seeing our poor, were too sad. As for me, as you may imagine, the idea that I might have been married in the week of mobilization, might have been in Paris with Philip, where Mamma would surely have come to rejoin me before the invasion; that I might have had news of him, seen him sometimes, perhaps, nursed him if he were wounded, wept for him if he were dead; it was the torment of regret, added to that of absence and anxiety. I was consumed. At the beginning, I spoke all the time about my grief to Mamma. But it seemed to me that she did not care for Philip very much and that she did not really regret my not being married. After that, I no longer spoke to her about him.

“It was on the twelfth of July, in the morning, that our old Danielle came into my room while I was dressing and with an agitated face told me that Mamma was ill. I ran to Mamma, who was in bed, very pale, her features drawn; she told me not to be anxious, but to go to the hospital with Danielle and ask for a doctor. We knew slightly a young major from

whom Mamma had sometimes obtained a visit for one of the poor people who was ill.

"I went there. The major came at noon when he left the hospital. Mamma wished to receive him alone. He went out saying that he would return the following day, and Mamma gave me no explanation that day, the whole of which I passed beside her. The next day, when she had seen the major again, she told me that it was cancer of the breast. She had allowed it to develop in secret for two months; there could be no doubt about it. She was absolutely calm. She said to me: 'It is a long illness; I hope I shall see your brothers again.' As for me, alas! I could not contain myself; I sobbed like a simpleton. That displeased her. She assumed again that severe expression which used to intimidate me when I was little. I cannot imagine a saint going to his martyrdom with more strength and majesty. And yet she had taken me to see people who had that disease, and we both of us knew what it meant. She still went out at times, and she got up every day, right up to the middle of November. At that time a terrible blow shattered her strength. We received a letter from Jean, who had just been made a prisoner and who announced to us the death of Max.

"My poor Mamma! One can't speak of those things! Max had been killed at the beginning of the war, at the battle of the Marne.

"Jean said also; 'I received word from Philip a

month before I was taken. He was at the front and getting along well.'

"We began a sinister winter. Mamma suffered a great deal. The diet to which everybody was reduced down there did not agree with her and she wasted away. We had nothing for lighting the house. The first year there was a little petrol left in the town, but from the beginning of the second winter there was no more to be found. Not a drop of oil any more. Candles were so expensive that they had to be used most sparingly; we burned a little lard in the lamps, but lard we had to deduct from our ration, which was quite fair, and it was sometimes a choice between nourishment and light. Ah! that little wick in that great room! Mamma made me place it, now under the portrait of my father, now under the portrait of Max. After four o'clock in the afternoon we lived as if in a tomb. On good days Mamma would ask me to read to her. I would sit down close to the light and from there I would faintly see her, so pale on her pillow, her eyes wide open like two still black holes in the depth of that shadow. She sent me to look for books on the shelves of my father's room, where we had never changed anything, as you may remember, the books which she had read to him during his illness. There were some works on Roman history; I wondered how they could interest her. I would have so liked to read to her the books that Philip had given to me, the new books that had so deeply interested Philip and Max—written by their

professors. But I was too timid to suggest it to her. . . . When the pain was too great, we did not read; I knitted, always close to the night-lamp, but often without seeing anything, and my tears would fall on my work. In spite of all her strength of soul, Mamma groaned sometimes. . . .

“The evenings when she let me bring the little lamp close to her, it calmed me to see her face. I would have then a sort of hour of anæsthesia, between the gray day which one hardly dragged oneself through and the sleepless night that consumed one. That face of Mamma’s, afflicting as it was, seemed to me so beautiful, so dear, in its aureole amid the shadows, set off from everything that did not belong to it. In spite of the immense respect which Mamma inspired in me, I felt something miserly in me which closed about the possession of her face; it was for me, that face, for my eyes, for my love. But the evenings when she did not wish me to be near her, or when she wished not to have any light, or the nights when she would groan in a smothered voice, in the depths of that room, which seemed to me as big and black as a church, I was overwhelmed with an infinite sadness. Then I formed the habit of thinking of Philip as if he were there, in the adjoining room, and later as if he were nearer still, just by my side, I made him sit in the room, I knew to which side I should have to turn my head to see him, or hold out my hand to touch him. This gave me strength, and sometimes became a sort of ecstasy. I’ll tell you a strange

thing, Adrienne: since the letter of Jean's which announced to us at the same time that Max was dead and that Philip, in the month of October, 1915, was well and safe, I never again thought of the possibility that Philip might be killed. At least, I thought of it; but the idea had no reality for me; it did not even move me any more, after having tortured me the first year. It seemed to me that destiny had been put to the proof, that it had given a sure response. It was settled. I thought more and more of my future and I surrendered myself to a dream-life that unfolded during those interminable dark hours of that winter and was for me a sort of philter, giving me the strength to endure another.

"Mamma was cared for by the German major, that little Dr. Lucius Gottfried, who had made the diagnosis of her disease. He came to the house every fifth or sixth day, at noon, when he was finished with his regular duties, always in uniform, smelling of ether and carbolic acid. He was a little man, too weakly to be good for service at the front, a very young man, blond and bearded, slightly round-shouldered, with a nervous face and blinking eyes. We always found him attentive and very polite. He had a great admiration for Mamma because of her calmness and her courage. He sometimes said to me, as he came out of her room: 'Sie ist doch wunderbar, die gnädige Frau!' Sometimes he saw me crying; then he would look at me with a distressed air, bowing and shaking his head, saying over and over:

‘Ach, Fräulein, ich weiss; es ist schrecklich!’ This terrible disease impressed him a great deal; he had seen someone of his own family—an aunt who had brought him up, he told me—die this way.

“He took a great deal of trouble to get us morphine, which was not easy. The druggists did not sell it any more, and there were many weeks when we were without it. What weeks! The nervous strain was worse than the suffering. There wasn’t a moment of respite! Her face was drawn, her hands twitched the bed-clothes. I passed days and days hoping for the moment when I would see her smile come back! Her eyes became hollow, pale; they had taken on a dim transparency. After the great crises they looked at me as if they were no longer the eyes of Mamma. I experienced an unutterable anguish.

“The little major had told us, Danielle and me, how the dressings must be made. I was always on hand to help with them, but I was not able to make them myself. Mamma knew very well that I did not have the courage, and that displeased her so much! But she spared me, she was indulgent! During the dressings, she said nothing; she kept her eyes closed and held under her nostrils a little handkerchief dipped in lavender water, for the odor was terrible. It is a suffering for which one can never find a word. When she had finished, Danielle’s forehead was often drenched with perspiration.

“How can I tell you any more, my friend? How

can I picture for you the slowness of those months! The winter passed: it was an eternity. In the spring, it was a little better. Mamma was able to come down every day to the garden; I installed her there in her long chair; she saw the lilacs, the cytisuses blossoming. The freshness and the perfume of the flowers gave her pleasure; she was astonished at herself. The poor people, to whom she could not go any more, came to her; they brought her their little children; she distributed the clothes which we had sewed and knitted, Danielle and I, during the winter. As for me, I never went out any more; I saw no more Boche soldiers except on the days when they came to our house with some requisition. When I was sitting near Mamma, dozing under our old trees, through which the sun filtered, the sadness of the war grew dim. . . . Often, after long meditation, Mamma would speak to me about my father, sometimes as if he had died only the year before. I realized that hers was a life of memory as mine was a life of hope. The complete absence of news, the lack of any communication with the outside world more and more effaced the present, and Mamma quite naturally slipped into the past among the things of which she had thought all her life without speaking of them to us. Often I had the impression that she had forgotten me, even while she was talking to me; she would speak as if I had known her whole past, she alluded to events of which I knew nothing. We never spoke of the future or of Philip. I was silent

about him because, face to face with her, I was ashamed to think of him too much, to live too much in the depths of my heart, perpetually in her presence as I was. I knew from that time on that Mamma would never see him again—or Jean—and that if I was going to be happy, it would be far from her, after she had reached the very end of her Calvary. . . . I felt I must conceal all this from her.

“Jean wrote to us regularly each week; I wrote to him just as often, and so we shared the dreary life of the prisoners. Toward the end of June, a word, very cleverly disguised, from one of his comrades whom we did not know, but whom he had often mentioned in his letters to us, gave us to understand that he had escaped several days before and that there were reasons to believe that his attempt would be successful. After that, we received no more news. Mamma, who was proud of this feat, but who showed that she was in terrible distress over it, became much worse. I had asked Jean to keep in communication with Philip, if possible, and to forward the news to me. Twice during the winter he had written: ‘Philip is all right!’ After his escape the only thread that attached me to the visible existence of my fiancé was broken. I no longer had any contact with Philip except the invisible one. I went on living in the hourly evocation of him.

“The summer was very hard: the crises of suffering became more cruel than ever; Mamma was truly being consumed by her cancer, which was growing

in a frightful way. She had now all the time that ghastly look of which I have already told you, that look in which I could no longer recognize her personality: a cold, anxious look that seemed to be coming from some other soul. It will surprise you, perhaps, but I assure you that of all I suffered from Mamma's illness, the most insupportable thing was to see her with that look.

"Toward the middle of September, there was a sudden change and, although the suffering was alleviated, I realized that she was much worse. Major Gottfried told me that the end was near. She had one last grief: it was about that time that poor little Julian, as I told you a few minutes ago, after having been fastened to a post for two days, went to work in the German trenches. She knew about it, and I saw expressed on her face a degree of sorrow that invited death. She did not suffer any more, except at intervals; but she was very weak and almost unrecognizable. I passed the whole of every day beside her bed in an oppression which I relieved by pronouncing the name of my fiancé. Sometimes for hours she would lie motionless, not asking me for anything. I did not know whether she was sleeping or whether she was absorbed in her thoughts. The depth of the cavities of her eyes was terrible to see. Once, opening her poor eyes, which were never entirely closed, she said to me, after one of these profound silences: 'Don't weep for me, my child. I have suffered a great deal, but I have reached the

end. One cannot regret having suffered.' And then she added, after being silent a moment:

"'No, I regret nothing, neither my widowhood, which desolated my youth, nor the death of my son whom I have given to France, nor this illness that has made me die as cruelly as your poor father. I want to tell you this so that you may recall it when your own trials come. Life is hard but it is the road to God.' The power of expression failed her, but her thoughts went on in the failure of her forces and she repeated over and over again confusedly, 'the road, the road . . . it is worth the pain!'

"She rarely spoke to me of God, and I had not suspected this concentration of religious thought which revealed itself in her words. She was so strong, Mamma, and so solitary. Max was like her.

"In the evening of the same day, she said to me: 'Nise, you will be very lonely here when I am no longer with you. You must have yourself repatriated. The doctor has promised me to help you with the application and to give you a recommendation himself. If you can find your fiancé again, all will be well, and you have reason to hope that you will find him.' As I wept, without being able to reply to her, she stroked my hand gently, saying: 'Poor little girl. . . . It's a long time, two years of youth. . . . I know. . . . I know. . . . It's very long. I would not wish you to lose one more!'

"Her voice was indulgent; she caressed me as if I were a little lost kitten beside her. It's unbelievable

that, having loved Mamma as I loved her, I should have felt all the time so far from her soul.

“Two days later she asked for the priest. It was the old curé of our parish who came to see her. She remained for a long time alone with him, then he came to look for me and told me to prepare the room for the Extreme Unction. Mamma wished me to go and call our two old cousins, who came to see us regularly on Sundays on their way home from vespers to ask for news of her, and whom she had not received for three months. I sent Daniellé to find them. They arrived together, Cousin Agatha and Cousin Rose; they entered the room timidly. Mamma had always rather impressed them. Mamma made them a sign with her hand to kneel down, and then the ceremony began. Mamma’s energy dominated us to such a degree that none of us wept. I felt in my heart a strength that came entirely from her. When it was ended, she called my cousins and drew them, one after the other, to the bed to embrace them. She said: ‘Adieu, my good friends, thank you for your affection.’

“Cousin Agatha said: ‘Don’t be anxious about Nise.’ But Mamma did not wish that I should go to live with my cousins—‘shadows and shadows of shadows,’ as she had once called them, with the sad and slightly cold irony of her smile. She replied shortly: ‘I confide her to the good God. She is going to try to go to Paris to find her fiancé again.’

“It was the next day, toward five o’clock in the

afternoon, that I lost Mamma. During the whole of the last day, she had said scarcely anything more, but when I knelt down close to her her hand blessed me. Her last hour was very calm, and I had the consolation of seeing her delivered from her suffering before she had left her body. As soon as she had taken her last breath, her features fixed themselves in a beauty that was almost terrible. She did not have that strange look that had given me such anguish—no, she was herself, magnificent and intelligible. Her face expressed the whole quality of her life, with a pride, a sadness, a severity, a peace that amazed and almost chilled me. I stayed near her till midnight. One last time I placed the little candle at the head of the bed to gaze upon her in the melancholy light of so many vigils—in a contemplation which I would have wished to remain with me beyond that hour, to the very end of my life.

“At midnight, Danielle, her eyes red with tears, came to replace me at our *prie-dieu*, and I went into my room. My head was dizzy; I needed air. I opened the window and went out on the balcony. Adrienne, how can I tell you about that hour, the shame of my life? I breathed as one drinks when one is perishing of thirst. It had rained during the day; the air was light, cleansed. A damp and slightly bitter odor sprang up from the dead leaves and the ivy and from the last roses that hung from the railing of the balcony. In an abyss of pure blue I saw the stars shining through the already quite thin

foliage of the birches. They seemed large and quivering like hearts of light. It was as many as fifteen days since I had even been down to the garden, and this silence, this fresh depth of the night, pierced my soul. What clear, sparkling, solemn beauty! What a peace that fairly forces itself upon you comes from those distant stars! And, in the midst of this peace, the soul sends forth as it were a note of music, simple, primitive, and of a single tone, like the cry of the curlews which I have heard on the coast of Brittany on nights when the moon is full. A note one cannot stifle! I thought of Philip. I thought of myself going away, living again in the free country where he was a soldier—and this one idea of finding him, alive, real, after having for two years embraced his phantom, intoxicated me. At first it was only a very sweet feeling of certainty; faint breaths of air passed across my forehead and made me tremble, like promises of everything my heart had so long needed. But the more I became absorbed in the thought of Philip, the more my eagerness grew. All my grief, all the weight of two years of suffering, privation, waiting, mourning, the terrible anguish at Mamma's bedside, all this was changed into a desire for happiness that struggled in my breast. It was a fever, an indescribable transport! Already almost a foretaste, almost the savor of the joy of the lips! It's monstrous, isn't it? That evening, that sacred evening! All of a sudden I was ashamed, I tried to subdue that frenzy, I left the

balcony; but I did not dare to go back to the room where Danielle was watching beside the bed; I knelt down beside the door; I held my ungrateful head there and then I threw myself on my bed, where I remained trembling till morning. I believe it's necessary for me to tell you this, my friend, so that you may understand my life as I understand it now myself.

"Next, I must tell you how I immediately took the necessary steps to have myself repatriated, with Danielle, and how we succeeded, thanks to the help of Dr. Gottfried. Till December we awaited week by week the word for us to go. I lived in a double dream between Mamma and Philip. I can remember scarcely anything of that time.

"When we left Vouziers—there were a hundred people or so in a little local train—a non-commissioned officer at the last minute opened the door of the compartment where I was sitting with Danielle and, quickly picking up a child who was standing on the platform, raised it toward us. 'Orphan,' he said in French, before closing the door; 'no business here. In France, in France . . .' It was a boy of six years, dark and frail. He had a stupefied, passive, mortally sad expression. All the places on both seats were occupied; but I am not large and I made room for him beside me. I looked at the label which they had hung at his neck. His name, Leonard Seulin, was written on it, with the word, Orphan.

"The first journey lasted eight hours. It was night

when we arrived at a village near which had been erected some great plank barracks where we were to be installed. There was fresh straw inside. They had warned us that each must bring his own blankets, and I learned what it is to sleep as a soldier does. We were in quarantine and shut up closely, so that we would not carry into France any recent news about the movement of troops. This lasted eight days. During this time I occupied myself to a certain extent with little Leonard Seulin and several of the children who had been brought to the train along with him and turned over to the charity of the travelers. But there were mothers of families among us who naturally took charge of these little ones.

“We were a dreary company; I recall especially those with whom I finished the journey. There was a young man—the only one in the convoy—a consumptive, so wasted, with his knotted, bluish temples, his poor, wan, projecting mouth, that he seemed to be tasting continually the bitterness of an ill for which he had no remedy. He spoke sometimes to reassure some old women who, in their agitation, were saying that they had been deceived, that the Germans, instead of sending us back to France, were going to keep us in these barracks till the end of the war. He intervened with a weary, patient voice, and then he rapidly turned his head away as if he feared that they would speak to him about himself. There was a very old priest, very polite, who stretched himself out on his straw bed with as much dignity as if he

were sitting in his confessional. He had a beautiful crown of white hair, little shining, uncertain eyes which looked at nothing and which had something soothing in their absent-minded expression. We scarcely counted these two men in the convoy. Apart from them, it consisted of women who were either ill or in charge of a number of children. I recall one poor creature, a woman in a kerchief who had great brown eyes full of spirit and deep hollows under her cheek-bones, and was carrying her last baby wrapped in a beautiful cashmere shawl. When we were left to ourselves, with the doors closed, we talked about the Germans; each one told what she had had to suffer, what they had taken out of her house, which members of the family had been taken away to forced labor. We told each other, also, whom we were going to look for in France, fearful that they were not going to be found again. Many of the women had husbands in the army. It pierced my heart to think that some of them surely would find no other response, at the end of their journey, than the silence of the dead. As for myself, I was all the time in that same folly of security. I did not have one real doubt, one feeling of anxiety! . . .

"After the eight days of quarantine, we were joined at the frontier by other groups of emigrants who had come mostly from the mining country about Lens, and were going to travel with us. The journey across Germany lasted about thirty-six hours. I retain only one picture from it: that of a French

prisoner in a dark blue uniform, who was digging in a field beside the track and who, straightening himself as the train went by, threw us kisses with both hands. Little Leonard was still in the same compartment with me. When we asked him if he had known his mother, he replied in a slow, level voice: 'She is dead.' Looking at him, I felt convinced that he had been present at that death, perhaps quite alone, that he had contemplated that fearful mystery of his own mother becoming insensible, indifferent, turning no longer when he cried. He seemed to be well brought up, shy and nice. There was a sort of astonishment and resignation in the depths of his dumb eyes; his whole face was strangely unsmiling. He did not talk to me, but he gladly kept close beside me and showed me a sort of animal confidence that was very sweet to me. This helped me to endure an excess of hope and emotion that was consuming me. I calmed myself by holding his little hand.

"At Schaffhausen, we got down from the German train. The station was full of Swiss women who had come to welcome us and aid our poor; they distributed clothes, food; they opened large rooms for us to wash in. The children, sitting in the station, ate the chocolate they had brought for them; many of the women wept; we were so exhausted with fatigue! And in spite of the kindness of the Swiss, France still seemed far away.

"We arrived here the following morning, after having spent another night on the train. At Geneva,

we left the Swiss train to climb into a miserable little tramway that took us across the frontier. It was snowing heavily, and the snow muffled all sounds, threw a great calm, a magic, over the air.

"I believe there was not in our convoy a single heart so afflicted that this hour did not relieve it. Our little boys were collected on the platform of the tramway and their excited faces seemed quite rosy in the whirling whiteness. Then, when the houses of Annemasse came into sight, they began to sing the Marseillaise, all together, in their shrill voices. It was a moment of rapture.

"The Marseillaise! How did they know it, those little boys of ten, of eight, who for two years and a half had lived under the German oppression? Ah! it was beautiful, you know! One felt like a frozen stream which in the spring begins to run again. . . .

"I took the train that evening, with Danielle, the train for Paris. I hadn't the strength to think of anything. One single word was ringing in me like a bell and vibrating to the very ends of my fingers: To-morrow! To-morrow!"

Little Nise, her face turned toward the fire, had an absorbed look, like someone who is gazing intently into the depths of a great pit.

"Well," she said, "we reached Paris! I had myself driven to that little hotel where I had descended with Mamma every time we had come to see Max: I didn't know of any other. As the hour approached when I was going to find out about the fate of

Philip, I was seized with fear From far away, as I have told you, I had had no real doubt for a long time, The sentiment of my life obsessed me too much. But at the last moment, faith failed me. I was as they say somnambulists are when they are awakened brusquely in the midst of a dangerous action. They have a sudden dizziness, don't they, and sometimes they fall? The excess of fatigue had left my spirit inert: I found myself again in that hotel where I had seen Mamma, Max and Philip; I felt nothing but the emptiness about me; it seemed to me probable that death had taken everything from me.

"As soon as I had made my toilet, I asked Danielle to come with me to the rue de l'Abbé-de-l'Epée. You know it was there that Philip had his little apartment, his little lodging on the fifth floor, full of books and old hangings. Max had taken me there several times at the beginning of my engagement. I took Danielle's arm in the street; my knees were giving way. I entered the *loge* of the house alone. An old concierge was there, stout and pale, absorbed in his newspaper. I was thinking that my whole life depended on the two or three words that he would say to me; I looked at his surly, flabby old mouth with a terrified fascination. I did not know how to put my question. It was not the same concierge whom I had seen there the few times I had come. He looked me up and down over his newspaper with an annoyed air. Finally, I asked: 'Has M. Brunel his apartment here still?'

“‘30, avenue de l'Observatoire,’ he replied, and plunged into his reading again

“I did not want to ask anything more: I knew that Philip was alive; I remember that odd sensation of weakness and almost of pain, as if my body was too small to contain the joy that shook me. I was burning to run to the avenue de l'Observatoire, but I did not dare. He would not know about Mamma's death, I must tell him about that first; and it suddenly occurred to me that he, too, might perhaps want to tell me something before we saw each other. The concierge had spoken in a categorical tone that seemed to me to imply that Philip was living now in Paris. But why had he moved if he was still in the war? Had he been discharged? Had he received some serious wound? . . . This did not frighten me. I was too overjoyed to know that he was alive. It struck me that he had chosen this new apartment in order to wait for me, thinking of our marriage, that it was the place where we should live together. I should not have wished to enter it otherwise than by his taking me there. I went back. I wrote him a long letter which I then took to the box of the pneumatic. I told him that I would not go out again until I had seen him or received word from him.

“The next day, immediately after breakfast, I sent Danielle out to see some relatives of hers who had left their farm on the outskirts of Vouziers and taken refuge in Paris at the beginning of the war. I was

sure that Philip would come. I went up again to my room, where I could do nothing but wait, my eyes closed. Ah! I had formed bad habits at Vouziers during those lightless evenings! Waiting, with closed eyes, when shall I cure myself of that?

"At half-past two, a little boy brought me his card. I asked him to give him the number and let him come up.

"A minute after he entered the room. He was in civilian's dress, the left sleeve of his coat hanging empty from his shoulder, and flat the length of his body. I had the impression that his figure had grown thinner and unsymmetrical, that his balance was uncertain. He was extremely pale. I was so shocked that I could not move. Sitting on the edge of an old lounge, I held my clasped hands toward him and looked at him with tears in my eyes. He awkwardly closed the door and then, instead of coming to me, he remained standing at the entrance of the room like a man who does not know what is coming next. Then I understood that something else had happened to him than what I saw, something worse. I asked him, very low: 'Philip, what is it?'

"He approached; he sat down; he ended by saying: 'I have not kept the promise of our engagement. Denise, I am married.'

"I closed my eyes, trying to understand. He said, wretchedly: 'Perhaps you wouldn't have wanted me any more, Denise. You see what they've done to me.'

"It's unbelievable, Adrienne, isn't it? Unbelievable, the things men can say sometimes!

"I asked him if he could tell me how all this had happened. I felt that I was seeing him for the last time and that, if possible, I should prefer to understand.

"Well, he told me his story, since he had been wounded at Verdun last March. They had, he said, amputated his arm a first time at Bar-le-Duc, then brought him to Paris where it had been necessary to amputate again, twice, and to end by taking away the shoulder. He told me that in the excess of his suffering things had changed, the past had grown dim."

Adrienne got up impatiently and, holding high her pretty, sensible head, began to walk about the room, as young people do.

"He told you that?" said she. And she thought: "Yes, yes, that's the way they are, those dreamers, those intellectuals, those people who are always thinking about themselves. That's what this philosopher found to say to this faithful little soul! Suffering changes you! After Nise's story, that phrase comes in very well!"

In her irritation was mingled a sort of severe contentment that she had married an engineer who was a simple man. "These Huleaus," she thought, "have always had unreal perspectives of life. How could poor Max become fond of such a fellow, with that spineless face of his!"

But within herself an impartial voice suggested: "Is it not true, all the same, that suffering does change one sometimes? That a sensibility stirred to certain depths lends itself to new emotions, to new passions?" And she recalled this and that wounded man in her hospital, simple men often, the amorous excitement of whose look had struck her. She heard the echo of certain forgotten words which men who had been operated upon often stammered as they were coming out of anæsthesia. . . . "Well," she asked, in a harsh voice, "whom has he married?"

"A nurse," little Nise replied, innocently. "He told me that she had twice helped him after the chloroform, at a time when he regretted that he was not dead. Before being wounded he had passed at Verdun one week, in a filthy hole, among the dead and dying, so frightful that he was left with a sense of being crushed, exhausted for good and all. Alas! the one who had so powerfully protected me against despair I had not protected at all! At the hospital he was desperate. He told me that this young girl who had nursed him radiated an influence of consolation, of assuagement. I remember the words he used: he spoke of her deep tranquillity, of her strength, of the beauty of her gestures. He explained to me that he had found in her the cure of his soul. That tells it all, doesn't it? The cure! As for me, I had nothing to bring him but a life already sadly wounded; how could I have cured him? Perhaps, too, I loved him too much. There is no serenity

in that. And as for him, philosopher as he is, it is his instinct to seek not to be confused. He talked to me a long time like a friend."

"These people have a passion for talking about themselves," thought Adrienne. "I'm sure he forgot her entirely while he was talking to her. And they always count on sympathy! Poor child, to tell her about his second love!"

"His temples were damp," continued Denise. "He kept calling me by my name. Happily! I thought: 'He sees clearly he cannot pretend that we have not loved each other!' He told me that, once restored, he had acquired the certainty that this feeling, born from his illness, would last beyond it, that he had taken the chance, and that he found the young girl loved him also. They became engaged in July and were married in September in Brittany, at the sea-shore. I wanted to know the day: it was during the very week when I had lost Mamma! . . .

"I asked him if his wife had known of his first engagement. He became uneasy, and replied with agitation that she had not. She did not know—it was not necessary that she should know; it would have given her a very troubled conscience. He was silent, and then, after a moment, he said: 'She is very devout.' As I answered nothing, I felt that he was growing more and more disturbed; his agitation made me indignant, and I was too proud to say the word that would dispel it. I felt myself blushing. He noticed nothing of this; his face was absorbed;

he was only thinking of his wife; it was as if he had seen her before him, her whole being full of reproach and pain. He ended by saying in a timid voice and with a note of tenderness that almost made me scream: 'Just now, especially, she needs to be very carefully handled.' Then, in his turn, he blushed suddenly and fixed his eyes on the carpet.

"'But, Philip,' I said to him, 'it would never have entered my head to disturb your wife's peace of mind.'"

Adrienne savored, as it passed, this new irony: the archangel of serenity menaced by little Nise!

The latter continued:

"There followed a silence between us—it was hideous. He did not dare to look at me any more, and as for me, I felt myself becoming as lifeless as a stone.

"I looked at him, nevertheless, especially at his beautiful forehead and his drawn temples which I had once so loved to touch, and I said to myself: 'Well, it's finished. . . . Well!'

"We talked a little more. He told me that he was discharged, that he had returned to his course in philosophy and the preparation of his thesis.

"Then he rose and murmured: 'Denise, if I could have believed that I should find you again, this way, in this mourning, in this solitude. . . .' But he did not finish this phrase. He asked, simply: 'Am I not going to see you again? Is there no way in which I can be of service to you?' I signified that there

was not. He insisted again: 'Everything is over?' Adrienne, was it not cruel of him, was it not atrocious of him, to ask this? I was so tempted—even after all the torture he had made me pass through, I tell you—to throw myself against his mutilated shoulder—that shoulder which the other one had nursed—to embrace him as I used to do, him, my friend, my fiancé, my only treasure, and to say to him: 'Hide me somewhere! Carry me away!' So tempted! If I had spoken I should have said this. I made a sign with my head that he must go. He left at this, and I knew that it was ended.

"What do you think one can do, Adrienne, when one is in despair? During the first two hours after he had left me, I was very calm. I had some little sewing to do. When Danielle returned, I called her and we worked together, while we said the rosary. Since Mamma's death I had formed the habit of often sewing in the same room with Danielle. At eight o'clock I told her to prepare my bed and go to dinner. As soon as I found myself alone in that room where he had talked with me, I felt actually ill. It's odd, isn't it? Ill, icy cold, with my teeth chattering, and so weak that I had to sit down several times while I was undressing.

"I felt this at first more than the grief: this terrible chill all over my body and a dimness of the eyes such as they say people experience when they are dying. I went to bed, I put out the light: I passed the whole night without sleeping, without moving. It

seemed to me that my heart would have broken at the least movement. It was as if I were delivered over to a force that was protecting me against the violence of my pain, preventing me from stirring, preventing me from thinking. In an absolute passivity I heard the echo of Philip's words and my own; they struck in my head like the blows of a hammer; I submitted to them, unable to control them or to rise above them by any reflection whatever. Since then, I have told myself that this moral torture greatly resembles physical torture. The intelligence can do nothing against it. One is seized, caught up, actually eaten away, gnashed and gnashed again during these hours. One tries in vain to make oneself small, submissive, to keep quiet: the torturing machine is there; it works with all its teeth; one would say that it holds you by the feet, by the hands. It's horrible! . . .

"In the morning, as I still did not move, Danielle came in several times to ask me about my indisposition. I remember that the sound of my own voice astonished me when I replied to her, it was so dry and changed. And I said to myself: 'Well, it's finished, I am not young any longer. I shall get into the habit of not being loved by anybody. I shall probably always speak like that.'

"Toward noon, I dressed rapidly and went out. Returning toward evening, I said to Danielle:

"'M. Brunel has come to see me. Many things have happened to him during the war. He has been wounded. They cut off one of his arms, and then he

has been married.' It seemed to me that the cries of that good woman would drive me mad. I had had myself such need of crying! I said to her: 'Don't think any more of it, Danielle. If you knew how I have decided to forget him!' I who had never dissembled! I who had wept in her arms after Mamma's death!

"Of the three days that followed, I preserve only a confused memory. I know that I have never in my life walked so much. It's odd, but I had never looked so closely at the faces, the objects, the shop-windows about me. Have you noticed how, when you are in pain, what you see stamps itself on your mind? At the dentist's, for example? . . . I remember down to the least details a little restaurant where I lunched: the marble-topped center-table, the chairs painted with a green smudge, a group of foreign students, speaking a harsh-sounding language and laughing loudly, and the manager, and the little waitress who surreptitiously doubled the portion for me. . . . I evidently had the face of one who is suffering from hunger. It was very dark and very nasty weather, that week before Christmas—I don't know whether you recall it?—and what faces one encountered, cadaverous, careworn, harassed, with always the same weak, sad lines from the nostrils to the mouth, and then, from time to time in the mass, a pretty woman, a creature altogether of a different species from the others, with red cheeks, shining teeth, a light, buoyant way of turning her head, an air of satisfaction. Every time

I saw one like this, I wondered if she resembled Philip's wife, and the words that he had said—the cruellest words of all—burned in me more fiercely: 'Just now, especially, she needs to be very carefully handled.'

"One evening, I went to the Sorbonne, where Max had taken me two or three times to listen to a course in which he was passionately interested. I saw a line of people crowding up to the door of an amphitheater, and I took my place among them and entered. The course was one by just that professor whom Max had loved and of whom his letters, formerly, had spoken almost every day. When he came in, thin and grizzled behind the usher, he gave me the impression of a sort of manikin, the relic, the shadow of a man. Near me, I heard some young girls whispering, and I realized that they were pitying him for having lost his only son. For an hour he talked about Greek history, in a dead, mechanical voice; there was no one to listen to him but women and a few shabbily-dressed foreigners. I have never seen anything so sad. It soothed me. There are moments when one comes to rest on one's sorrow as a swimmer floats on his back. One seeks nothing, one ceases to imagine that anything else exists; one is calm there, bathed in a somber fluid that penetrates into one's last recess. One's inner resistances give way, the throbbing dies down and one believes that the end of the struggle has come, that one has truly surrendered. Besides, I may tell you that at no moment did I have a feeling

of revolt. Oh! I see clearly that I shall never make a rebel; I haven't the stuff of it in me! But the hardest thing for me was to understand, to get the facts into my head, to plant them there at the very root of my inner life, which was so entirely made up of my love for Philip.

I wandered about at random; I looked at all the faces; I looked especially at the mutilated men each one of whom was for me like a shadow of Philip, and I was terrified to meet such a great number of them. I went into the churches; several times I stopped at Nôtre-Dame. I leaned against a column of one of the transepts and looked at the great north rose-window, which is so sad, cold, blood-stained, glorious, like a promise of paradise suspended very far above our human wounds. And the cold of the lifeless stone against my shoulder did me good.

"One afternoon, I found myself on the edge of a great cemetery; I believe it was the cemetery of Montparnasse. I entered it; I stayed there a long time. It was snowing; no one had come to visit the dead at such a miserable time. It seemed to me that I would give everything in the world to find myself at Vouziers again, by Mamma's grave. As I was going out at nightfall, I saw, against the high wall hung with ivy, a man and a woman who were kissing each other. I looked at them, so near the dead, they who were as I myself had still been a few days before: people for whom death did not exist! They were a soldier in a muddy uniform and a bedraggled woman. How

long had they been thirsting for each other! They did not move as I passed; I did not see their faces, but I felt the passion of that poor woman, the tension of her whole thin, motionless body. She was suspended there like a lark at the summit of its flight. Surely they no longer knew that it was cold and dark; they were no longer wretched; everything was beautiful for them. I went on, believing myself calm. Things like that hurt one like a poison that only reveals its effects little by little.

"I went home. I found Danielle, her eyes red from weeping, who put me to bed and brought me some broth.

"A Sunday came, the fourth Sunday in Advent, which was also Christmas Eve. A great desire had risen in me to see that young woman who is now Philip's wife. In spite of my suffering, I had not yet altogether come to believe in her reality. There was something in me that did not believe it. As I have told you, I had so formed the habit of having inner recourse to my fiancé! I had led with him a dream-life which after two and a half years had ended by being almost as real as reality. I closed my eyes and he was in the room; I wept and he supported my head on his shoulder. It was an illusion so intense, a union so tender, that I had sometimes said to myself: 'When we are reunited, that will be no sweeter.' Well, as you can understand, this habit continued: it is just as when one is sitting by a dead person, one

still believes that one sees him breathing. And I thought: 'If I see him with his wife, it will be ended.'

"He had told me that she was devout, and he himself was in the habit of going to mass. We had gone together; we had followed it two or three times, one beside the other, very attentively. It had always been my impression that he did not have very much faith, but the things of the church pleased him. I wanted to try to see them at mass, to which I had no doubt they went together—and late, probably—for she 'had to be handled carefully.'

"I went to the eleven o'clock mass at Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas. They did not come.

"I waited still: at noon they arrived; I saw him, himself, walking behind her in the dim, filtered light of that church. A tall young woman—oh! Adrienne, so pretty, but not like those pretty women who haven't the air of belonging to the human race!—with long brown eyes, long lashes over colorless cheeks, and a beautiful curved nose. She wore a black hat the brim of which rose at the back over a knot of Auburn hair, radiant and perfectly arranged; a jacket of otter, a gray muff. This showed me that Philip's ménage was better off than I would have made it. She walked well, with a long, easy step. Her face was serious, calm, with an expression of gentleness and reserve. I followed her with my eyes and took a seat at one side, in the rear, at a spot from which I could see her slender back, her beautiful knotted hair, and, at three-quarters, her pale cheek. This was almost hidden

from me by the big black hat. She followed the whole mass, and when I saw that she was praying, I began to pray also, asking for the strength to accept this and to live according to my destiny.

"At one moment, I saw her lean slightly toward Philip, pointing out with her finger some line in his book, some text that had struck her. I realized how happy she must be; into that sensibility of Philip's, so fine, so vibrant, which knew how to respond to everything, she could make every one of her thoughts pass. And she already had, in that simple gesture, such an air of security! One would have said that she had had him always. I had the impression that she was proving to me, in all sweetness, in all good faith, and invincibly, that I had never existed. And yet, I pitied her a little for the harm she had done me, harm such as I would not wish to have done anyone—nor she either, I've no doubt. . . .

"When the mass was over, they went out; I followed them with my eyes in the column of people who were pressing toward the door; then I went out, I saw them descending the steps; she stopped, they smiled at one another; she partly opened her coat, slipped her fingers into the pocket of her jacket and drew out a few sous which she placed in the bowl of a beggar. They walked away, and I could follow them no longer.

"I had seen them; I realized my misery. He had met a woman much more beautiful than I, better, too, probably. They had fallen in love with each other;

perhaps, even, it was the heart of the young girl that had been moved first. . . . So, it was inevitable, wasn't it? The one you sacrifice cannot be the one you love.

"I was crushed with fatigue, I felt weak; my grief slumbered, heavy, immense, but calm, within me. In the afternoon I went to church again—another church—I heard vespers, the benediction, a long sermon, all in the midst of a torpor of exhaustion. I thought of Mamma, as, in the time when I was nursing her, I had thought of Philip—with that same impression of casting myself upon a sure refuge outside the world. I did not have the courage to turn my eyes forward toward any sort of future, but I felt as if I were laying down my whole life, one confused mass of sorrow, on the knees of my poor Mamma. I felt that no one would ever have pity for me except she, out of the depths of her eternity. I called down her sanctified hand upon my vanquished head. Ah! I had Jean, yes; I had not found him up to that moment; now I know that he is at the front; we write to each other. But he will never know what I have suffered. Can one tell these things to boys? Their own life is too young, too exuberant, for them to be capable of pity.

"And then, my friend, I went back over the past. I said to myself: 'No one will have pity for me, but for whom have I felt pity? Hardly for Mamma!' Those words of the Saviour's agony pronounced themselves in my spirit: 'What! Could ye not watch

one hour with me?' I realized that it had for me an appalling verity. I, who had passed so many nights at Mamma's bedside, asked myself if I had indeed *watched with her*, taken her sorrows on myself, sympathized with her as I had just entreated her to sympathize with me. I saw it clearly: when I was striving so hard to comfort her, I was seeking to thrust back the pain of hearing her groan. Her martyrdom was not immediately my own. I continued all the time to think of Philip, of my love, to feel that bliss that perpetually grazed my soul. . . . And at last I came to the memory of the hour of which I have told you, that terrible hour of egoism and frenzy. I tasted the most profound humiliation. I realized that my too covetous heart had merited its disaster. And the idea came to me that perhaps it would be my lot, the use that had been found for me, to remain simply, through my sorrow itself, a being who believes in sorrow and has pity.

"Slowly I drew myself away; I had scarcely eaten for six days and I was very weak. I think that if anyone had offered me a hand to support me, I should have accepted it. There was no cab nearby and the evening was cold. I returned on foot, went to bed and, for the first time since Philip's visit, I slept a sleep that was calm and without dreams.

"Toward two o'clock in the morning I awoke. It was Christmas night and the hour when once we had returned to the house, Mamma, my brothers and I, after the midnight mass. I sat up abruptly; I was

very wide awake, quite tense, without any feeling of fatigue. I had the impression that there was something that I must do, some decision for me to take, some hope for me to embrace; I felt that I had come to the end of wandering and wasting away with thoughts of myself. And yet I knew nothing whatever of what was going to happen. My heart throbbed in great separate strokes. For several seconds I remained so, my eyes open in the darkness, and then I felt rising from the depths of myself the image of that orphan of Vouziers, that little Leonard Seulin, with his forsaken face, those eyes of his into which the coldness of death had entered. I said to myself: 'It's that, it's he; there is the thing for me to do,' and I had a feeling of great joy.

"The evening of that Christmas day, that very evening, I set out for Annemasse, leaving Danielle at the hotel. I found immediately the young woman who, at our arrival, had taken charge of the little orphans of our convoy. I told her why I had come and what I had decided to do. She did not seem surprised. She was a charming person, a pastor's wife; she had a happy, serious face, full of innocence, a face of good augury. She took me to the house where Leonard Seulin was staying, a good Savoyard peasant's, who had six other little orphans, repatriated like himself. The house was a little off the road and one saw from afar its green shutters in the midst of an immense field of snow. We entered; the children were playing in the kitchen. They were all clean

and well-clothed. Leonard was the latest arrival. Hardly ten days had passed since we had stepped down together in the square of Annemasse. None of the others bore on his face that fixed look of stupefaction and melancholy. He recognized me, but did not smile at me. I asked him if he would like to come with me, never to leave me again. He looked at me with his grave eyes and nodded his head. In a few hours the first formalities were settled; I had the right to take Leonard away. We were in Paris on the morning of the twenty-eighth. Danielle has not been very pleased. . . ."

Both women were silent and looked at each other. Adrienne Estier asked:

"You are going to keep him always?"

"Naturally."

"Do you love him?"

"Yes, I have that happiness. I love him more deeply every day. When we are alone together and the thought of our common misery and weakness overwhelms me, I take his little head between my hands, and I feel, then, that this poor little crumb of love from which we draw our nourishment, he and I, is enough to bind us to life, blending us with the immense communion of beings who love one another. For a heart that has believed itself cut off from the company of the living, that is a resurrection."

"Denise, take care; you are very young still, even if you don't believe it! And so loving! Love rises again, as you say, in the heart, the true love, that of

the lover for the lover! Don't create for yourself a duty that is too absorbing."

Denise shook her forefinger before her little face, with its intense eyes.

"No," she said, "that, no! If Philip had broken his word with me after a month or two of our engagement, I would say to you: perhaps. . . . Although . . . what an enchantment it is! Is it possible that one does not remain embittered for good and all? But I lived too much by him, in him, during those thirty months of silence when I gave him the whole passion of my soul. What passes in these depths of suffering and desire, nothing can ever efface again. No, you see. No."

There was a silence. Then Denise went on:

I shall adopt others, later. Just one is not enough! —and then I should love him too much; I should end by becoming a burden to him. . . ."

Denise rose to go, and when she had buttoned her cape, she seized her friend's hands:

"Adrienne, come with me as far as the hotel, I beg you. It has done me so much good to talk to you, you can't guess! One needs a witness, someone who sees you. That gives you strength. I feel I have enough, now, to do something I haven't yet done. But if you let me go alone, I don't know, perhaps I shouldn't be able to, after all."

Without asking any questions, Adrienne put on her hat and her fur jacket again. They set out together. The snow had been falling all day and the moon was

turning the deserted streets blue. On the way, Denise said:

"It's good to breathe, isn't it, Adrienne? The air has a snowy taste. I feel it now as if I had risen from my grave."

"Yes, my dear."

"Will you believe it?" Denise went on: "After I saw Philip again, I lived at first in such mortal fear, then I went through a struggle that was so hard, not to be simply blotted out by my grief, to save my life, my soul, that I did not shed one tear, not one! I passed from despair into action almost without relaxing, save for that night of grace, that Christmas night! There were days when I would have gladly wept—that is so no longer. I have renounced that comfort. And now this is what I love, this sharp air of night, this calm, impassive light of the moon which makes my heart cold in the very spot where it was for so long on fire."

They reached the Hotel Corneille. Denise, passing in first, led her friend across the half-lighted entrance-hall, which smelled of cooking, up the staircase and then, by a long, padded corridor, to her room. She turned on the electric lamp that hung from the ceiling. "Danielle!" she called. A door opened and a tall, bony woman with beautiful, glistening gray hair, combed at the back, entered the room. A pale gleam lighted up her smiling face and her little gray-green eyes, deep-set under the thick eyebrows.

"Mademoiselle Adrienne!" she cried.

Adrienne squeezed her hand.

"You call her 'mademoiselle,'" said Denise, "and she the mother of a family!"

"Mademoiselle Adrienne!" repeated the old servant, "It isn't possible!"

"But it is, Danielle—and I hope you'll soon see my baby."

"Has Leonard gone to bed?" asked Denise.

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"Come and see him," said Denise to her friend. "Danielle, won't you please light the fire in my bedroom?"

The two friends passed into the adjoining room. At the foot of the maid's bed there was a crib where a little boy in a white nightgown was still sitting, his face turned toward the door.

Adrienne noted with a touch of sad irony this little suggestion of the timid maternity of the young girl. She thought of the plump baby whom she installed every morning on her pillow and whose rosy little feet she kissed. Denise had always been very modest; nervous and passionate as she was, she would pass part of the night thinking of the child. Adrienne imagined her gliding to the door, to listen whether he was breathing well and not having bad dreams—but she would have been no longer herself if she had been able to resolve to have him sleep in her own room. The little boy looked at them, his eyes full of silence. He was strangely beautiful. The electricity threw a

hard light over the smooth forehead under his thick hair, his straight nose, his fine well-set neck, with its little crease into which a heavy curl had slipped, his little white hands, marked still with the dimples of babyhood.

"Why do people always speak of the beauty of women," the pretty Adrienne said, quite low, to Denise, "when beings like that exist?"

Denise embraced Leonard and spoke a few words in his ear. Adrienne approached smiling, and said: "How do you do, Leonard?" The child raised toward her his large, sad eyes, his taciturn mouth. Without resisting, he let her stroke his hand. When they moved away he had an expression of pain; he pulled Denise's sleeve: "Not you, godmother; stay here." Denise, kissing his forehead, said quite low: "Godmother will come back right away." There was a gleam in her eyes as she entered her own room behind Adrienne. Danielle lifted the screen from a pile of blazing wood, and went out. Denise opened a drawer in a mahogany table; she took out a portfolio.

"You've guessed it," she said; "they are his letters. I have twenty-two of them. I risked everything to bring them with me. A little servant who meant to leave in our convoy was held back for having put in her trunk a photograph of her dead mistress, on the bottom of which had been written, 'Souvenir.'"

"Perfect folly, wasn't it? I was going to him, and I had to risk my happiness in order not to be sepa-

rated from his letters! I sewed them at the bottom of my trunk between the canvas and the wicker. Considering the way in which they examined our baggage, they ought to have found them twenty times. What folly! . . .

"Well, you see, I have not yet had the courage to destroy them. I have not read them but I know that they are there, and so long as they are I shall not truly have accepted my life. Come, Adrienne, I haven't the strength; put them in the fire!"

She placed between the hands of Adrienne Estier the packet of thin, crackling leaves, covered with a fine, scholarly handwriting; and opening the window, she leaned on the balustrade.

Two or three minutes went by in absolute silence. Then Adrienne placed her fingers on her friend's shoulder and said, in a low voice, "It's done." Denise did not move, and Adrienne, leaning forward, saw through the crêpe veil the white, contracted profile turned toward the moon, the tips of the fingers resting on her teeth.

Suddenly, Denise sought Adrienne's hand, carried it to her mouth, passionately pressed her lips to it. "Thank you," she stammered. "Leave me. It is finished, now. Put out the light as you go, I beg you. Thank you, thank you!"

THE END

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